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***Faith on the Anvil of Justice: Dr. Ambedkar's Response to Religions in India***



## **ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT**

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan  
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,  
op gezag van de rector magnificus  
prof.dr. F.A. van der Duyn Schouten,  
in het openbaar te verdedigen  
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie  
van de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid  
op donderdag 13 juni 2013 om 9.45 uur  
in de forumzaal van de universiteit,  
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Monodeep Daniel

geboren te Ranchi, India

promotoren: prof.dr. H.M. Vroom

prof.dr. L. Fernando

## **Restore Us Our *Selfhood***

“Imploring, begging and depending on the kindness of others will not *restore to us the selfhood* that we have been robbed of. We have to regain it on our own strength. It is true that the path of protest we have advocated is a difficult one, but our untouchable brethren should not let themselves be cowed down by the fear that the touchables will retaliate against their act of protest. We have to show our determination in our resolve”.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. *Bahishkrit Bharat*, May 20, 1927 cited by M.S. Gore in ‘The Social Context of an Ideology’.

## **Reclamation of the Human Personality**

“With justice on our side I don’t see how we can lose our battle. The battle for me is a matter full of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or sordid in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the *reclamation of the human personality* which has been suppressed and mutilated. My final words of advice to you is educate, agitate and organize, have faith in yourselves and never lose hope.”

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. (Report of Depressed Classes Conference, Nagpur Session, July 1942 in *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 17.3, p. 276)

Dedicated to  
professor Hendrik M. Vroom  
my guide and a gentle friend  
and  
Stanley J. Daniel  
my father  
who saw the beginnings but tragically not the end of this book.

## Foreword

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar assessed the religions in India on the anvil of justice. Through this exercise he not only aimed to bring out their worth but also to reform or reconstruct them if necessary to make them useful for forging a just society. That he regarded this seriously is evident in his sizeable writings on the subject of religion and social reform. The standard of English in these writings reveals Dr. Ambedkar to be a person of caliber of his times. Indeed his excellent academic achievement was well known. In this capacity he has not only contributed to the intellectual deposit of the world, but has equally contributed to construct the modern and secular State of India. Therefore, whatever he wrote and whatever he did has to be taken seriously. Here the temptation to delve more deeply into his life especially after the British parliament had passed the Government of India Act in 1935 must be admitted. Attempt in that direction would have verged on producing a biography. But the purpose of this study was not to do this; instead it is to cut out his basic ideas from the thick woods of his writings which he wrote in the course of his very active life as a statesman. I have highlighted the dilemmas which confronted him as he intellectually responded to the political leaders of his times especially Mahatma Gandhi and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The contours of these were shaped by his specific ideas of religion and society in the interest of those affected by untouchability.

In his search for a religion best suited for Dalits, Dr. Ambedkar found that religions, far from being united, were totally disarrayed in guiding whose interest were they to protect. Clearly Dr. Ambedkar was in dilemma. Obviously it was very complicated to resolve multi-faceted conflicts within religion. These were in forms of collective advantage vis-à-vis individual's interest and collision between a group's interests versus society's advantage. In the sections below we will discuss Dr. Ambedkar's predicament. My aim is not to undertake a survey of Dr. Ambedkar's writings, but to get through with his line of thinking and his basic insights into religions and society. Having done so I think it would be very interesting to reread his biography. But that is beyond the range of this study. However, the applications of such findings have a scope to influence various fields of human interest. If this would help people to re-read their scriptures, literature and epics, to critically engage with culture and to understand the ever changing political configurations, to write and comment, to preach and teach, to promote civil liberty and peace, and to engage in inter-religious dialogue, I believe the purpose of this work would be achieved.

I am most thankful to prof. Hendrik M. Vroom my guide at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. I am also grateful to prof. Leonard Fernando, S.J., my

guide in India at the Vidya Jyoti College of Theology, Delhi; prof. (habil.) James Massey, the founding director of Centre for Dalit Studies, New Delhi; dr. Victor van Bijlert and dr. Henry Jansen who endorsed the title of this book. I must acknowledge the generosity of my religious fraternity, the *Brotherhood of the Ascended Christ*, Delhi, to allow me to devote the necessary time out of my work to undertake this study in the Brotherhood House library. The invitation of Canon George I. Kovoov, the principal of the Trinity College, Bristol (U.K.) as a Commonwealth Fellow to the Centre for World Christianity of this college was a privilege. It helped me to do my work unhindered and use the college library for which I am grateful. The Revd Ian C. Weathrall O.B.E., the Head of the Brotherhood in Delhi, for sharing his memories of Dr. Ambedkar and providing me with several relevant books.

Monodeep Daniel



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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

#### Dr. Ambedkar in Search of Religion

Dr. Ambedkar who along with Mahatma Gandhi was the co-founder of the Indian State was incurably religious, but in an exceptional way. Feelings and emotions for religion were not so important for him; instead its utility in shaping the collective behaviour of a society was essential for him. It must be stated at the outset that Dr. Ambedkar's interest to study religion was social, not academic. This is clear from two things we find in his writings on this subject. The first thing we find are his critiques of current religions and advice for reforming them, and the second are his dilemmas as he searched for the religion best suited for Dalits. He was looking for a religion which could incorporate them in its society as equals and in this way help them to reclaim their *selfhood*. He proceeded to systematically identify the root purpose of religion in society and assessed whether or not a religion had subsequently evolved on this line. His voluminous writings published in the series *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* indicate that his thoughts emerged from years of thinking, reflecting weighing, assessing and studying various religious philosophies and political ideologies. But he was not one to be satisfied by being a faithful adherent; rather he wanted to dismantle the old and recreate religion anew in his line of conviction i.e. to offer people dignity and equality. Interestingly both Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi agreed that in India social questions were related to religion. An important example of Gandhi's defense of religion and people's right to practice it in the society is evident in how he approached the *Khilafat* movement in India. We will deal with this in the chapter on Muslims later. The *Khilafatists* advocated the restoration of the Caliphate in Turkey which had exercised extensive influence around the Mediterranean Sea and Far East. Though these ideas of some Indians were debatable, Gandhi having judged its influence had started to tap its advantages for the Congress party right at the start of his political leadership in 1920. An extract of Gandhi's defense of his involvement in the *Khilafat* Movement demonstrates this,

"I claim that with us both the *Khilafat* is the central fact, with Maulana Mahomed Ali because it is his religion, with me because, in laying down my life for the *Khilafat*, I ensure safety of the cow that is my religion".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Mahatma Gandhi's defense in *Young India* issued on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1921 cited in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* Vol-8. Mumbai. Education Department. Government of Maharashtra. 1990. p. 151.

Admittedly Dr. Ambedkar, like Mahatma Gandhi, stressed religion but he firmly opposed Gandhi's communal method in politics. It was like playing with fire. This is what Ramachandra Guha, currently a well known historian, also points out about religion. He highlights four allied cause of conflicts in India. Along with caste, language and class, religion is also one of these.<sup>2</sup> Religion did not need any political patron, but it required a truthful appraisal for correction and reform. This is why Dr. Ambedkar's critical approach to religion is defensible. The significance of this for those studying religion lies in the way he understood its relevance in his times and context. But let us first introduce our star Dr. Ambedkar, who is the subject of our study.

### 1. Who was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar?

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (April 14, 1891–December 6, 1956) was born in Mhow (central India)<sup>3</sup> a town well known for its large garrison. He was a nationalist and a contemporary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), Mohammed Jinnah (1876–1949), Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), Abdul Kalam Azad (1887–1958) and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964).<sup>4</sup> He became the first Law Minister of independent India and is known for his contribution to social equality for the Scheduled Castes. Much has been written on his life and work. For our study, however, it is necessary to know his religious upbringing. It is known that his family kept the palanquin of the village goddess for which they were held in prestige in their community. Although the family followed the *bhakti* or the devotional stream of the Hindu tradition, it is unclear if they were *Kabirpanthis* or adherents of the Kabir-sect as such.<sup>5</sup> For us it will be useful to draw a line under the depressed caste status of the founders of these *bhakti* sects, e.g. Kabir was a weaver and Raidas was a *chamar* or leather-worker. Another feature of the *bhakti* stream was its emphasis on social equality which immediately made it popular among the Dalits.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in Kabir's poems.

In the path of devotion there are no garbs or pretence  
No bias of caste and creed, of high and low;

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<sup>2</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of World's Largest Democracy*. London: Picador (Imprint of Pan Macmillan), 2008, p. xix.

<sup>3</sup> His parents were Ramji Sakpal and Bhimabai who were by caste Mahar, a community that was regarded among the Untouchables. He was the fourteenth child. His father was a minor officer in the Indian army. Dr. Ambedkar unlike many other Dalits was not deprived in extreme ways.

<sup>4</sup> Judith M Brown. *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 423–427.

<sup>5</sup> Flood notes that poet-saints or sants in north India were from various social backgrounds. Mirabai was a princess, Nanak was a khatri. However, the impact of Kabir (1398–1448) was the greatest. He was born in a Muslim family of weavers. His popularity is due to his bold criticism of the religious practices both of the Muslims and Hindus current in that era. These sants gathered a following around them. So the followers of Kabir were known as Kabirpanthi, of Raidas were the Raipanthis. Cf. Gavin Flood. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011, p. 144–145.

<sup>6</sup> Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 9.

Who adores God's name is the highest of all and a rare soul.<sup>7</sup>

Such lyrics, which abound in *bhakti*, celebrate the affectionate personal relationship of a devotee with God. For the *bhakti* saints God is not *nirguna* or impersonal force, but is personal and full of good attributes i.e. *saguna*. Themes in the *bhakti* spirituality emphasised awe for the Divine—His name, word, grace, loving devotion and submission to a spiritual master i.e. Guru. At the same time it must be admitted that the Indian poet-saints of the *bhakti* tradition (1300-1600 CE) found little success in changing the social order of caste. Dr. Ambedkar drew attention of the people to this drawback in his speech in 1928 at a meeting convened for planning to construct a temple for Chokamela, a saint of the *bhakti* tradition. He said,

Yet from the view point of the annihilation of caste, the struggle of the saints did not have any effect on society. The value of man (*sic!* humanbeings) is axiomatic, selfevident; it does not come to him as the result of the gilding of *bhakti*. The saints did not struggle to establish this point.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently the problem of social inequality under which Dalits suffered in Indian society was left unchallenged. This is as far as the background of Dr. Ambedkar's family concerns us; let us now turn our attention to the boy Bhim.

Education was not open for children of the Scheduled Caste families. They normally followed the trade of their families. However for some bright children—particularly boys—exceptions were made. Bhim was an intelligent boy but he was discriminated in school, for instance, by being made to squat separately in the class on a piece of gunny cloth.<sup>9</sup> To help the boy out of this situation, a Brahmin teacher, who had enrolled him in the school, gave him his own name Ambedkar.<sup>10</sup> The boy thereafter stopped using his family name Sakpal<sup>11</sup> that identified him as an Untouchable.<sup>12</sup> Admittedly Gandhi too was ignorant of Dr. Ambedkar's antecedent until his encounter with him at the 1931 second Round Table Conference.<sup>13</sup> The Round Table Conferences (1930-32) in London were convened in London to deliberate on the political future of India. Here Dr. Ambedkar, as a representative of the Depressed Classes (the official nomenclature for Dalits in those times), argued

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<sup>7</sup> V.K.Sethi, *Kabir: The Weaver of God's Name*. Dera: Radha Soami Satsang. Beas. Dera-Baba-Jaimal-Singh, 1998, p. 675.

<sup>8</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Value of a Man is Axiomatic, Self-evident' (1928), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol.17.3, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar* p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> The mistaken idea among some that this name was a derivation of "Ambvadekar" probably emerges from the fact that the Dr. Ambedkar's family originally came from the village *Ambvade*. Cf. Vasant, Moon. Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar*. New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> His full name was "Bhimrao Ramji Sakpal".

<sup>12</sup> Anthropologists like David Blundell have used the term "undercaste" to denote the Untouchables. *India Today* Vol XXXIII No. 16. April 15-21, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Deleary. *India: The Rebel Continent*. New Delhi: MacMillan. 2000, p. 329



and succeeded in procuring his demand for Depressed Classes to separately elect their representatives for the Legislative Assembly in the British-India, besides electing general representatives with all the rest of the people. This was the famous communal award of the then British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. Although in 1932 Dr. Ambedkar withdrew this demand at Mahatma Gandhi's behest, his basic demand for a just share of political power for Dalits did not change. The basis of this political demand was articulated in his cry "restore to us the *selfhood*".<sup>14</sup>

Having completed his education from the Elphinstone College, Mumbai, he received a scholarship from Sayajirao Gaekwad, Maharajah of Baroda, to pursue his education overseas.<sup>15</sup> Sayajirao was committed to social reforms.<sup>16</sup>

A brief survey of Dr. Ambedkar's academic track brings a couple of facts to light. The first thing is that religion was not his subject of study at the university and the second one is that a benevolent sponsorship helped to change the destiny of innumerable people. Under the Maharaja's scholarship Dr. Ambedkar did his advanced studies at the Columbia University in U.S. living in New York for three years, 1913 to 1916. Here, in 1915, he submitted his thesis "The Administration and Finances of East India Company" and he was awarded the Masters of Arts. At that time he was 24 years of age.<sup>17</sup> At this time his interaction with the Afro-American community and the conversations surrounding the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution bringing social equality for all people in the United States impressed him.<sup>18</sup> Having enrolled himself in Gray's Inn for Law and with the London School of Economics for further studies, he returned to Mumbai on August 21, 1917 *via* Colombo. This was also a time of global upheavals. The Bolsheviks had succeeded in their revolution to establish the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1917, bringing the era of the Russian Empire to an end. At the same time the Great War 1914-1918

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<sup>14</sup> A translation cited on the title page of M.S. Gore *The Social Context of an Ideology: Dr. Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993 is as following: "Imploring, begging and depending on the kindness of others will not *restore to us the selfhood* that we have been robbed off. We have to regain it on our own strength. It is true that the path of protest we have advocated is a difficult one, but our untouchable brethren should not let themselves be cowed down by the fear that the touchables will retaliate against their act of protest. We have to show our determination in our resolve". (emphasis is added).

<sup>15</sup> This scholarship was of Rs.25/- per month, which shows Maharaja's progressive views of appreciating meritorious students irrespective of caste or class.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Zelliot *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2005, p. 313

<sup>17</sup> Kamal Kishore Kadam. (Education Minister of Maharashtra State) in Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Mumbai: Education Department. Government of Maharashtra. 1989, p. ix.

<sup>18</sup> In 1866, Congress (United States of America) passed the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution. This Amendment extended citizenship to the Afro-Americans of the United States. The text of the this 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment is: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws". [www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov) official website portal visited on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

was raging in Europe. These events were associated with revolutionary changes in the world especially in the field of economics and politics. Communism was going to redraw the international boundaries of many traditional Christian and Buddhist countries. The impact on these is evident on Dr. Ambedkar's theoretical outlook. He believed that it was possible to radically change society.

Under the agreement of his scholarship, Dr. Ambedkar was appointed as the Military Secretary to the Maharaja.<sup>19</sup> But the religious sensibilities of his subordinates in his office were such that they observed a careful distance from him. As the situation became unbearable he left his job and went to Mumbai where he started his career in the legal world. His help to Dalits made him known as the "poor man's barrister". On January 27, 1919, while in India, he testified to the Southborough Committee about the large numbers of those affected by untouchability and argued that their proportionate representation was important to make government truly representative.<sup>20</sup> This was the beginning of his political life also.<sup>21</sup> On January 31, 1920 having started a fortnightly newspaper *Mooknayak* (Organizer of the Silenced) with the help of Sayajirao Gaekwad, he published his writings in it.<sup>22</sup>

In July 1920 he left for London for advanced studies at the London School of Economics where he was awarded the Master of Science. Once in London Dr. Ambedkar also got the Barrister-at-Law for which he had earlier enrolled himself at the Gray's Inn of Law. This time he was sponsored by Chhatrapati Shahu the Maharaja of Kolhapur, who too was a reformist. Meanwhile his doctoral thesis, on which he was simultaneously working, was submitted albeit after he had returned to India that was published in 1923 by P.S. King & Son. Ltd. London under a new title.<sup>23</sup> In this work he showed that the convertibility of the Rupee coin was unstable due to an over-issue of it. This was precarious for the Indian economy. He, therefore, argued for the issuing inconvertible paper currency in lieu of metallic coins.<sup>24</sup> For this work he was awarded the degree, Doctor of Science, from the Columbia University in United States.<sup>25</sup> On returning to India he changed his track. Instead of economics he started to work on two fronts. The first front was to practice law to earn a living and the second was his engagement with politics. The agenda of his political life was to become the national representative of the Untouchables. This is

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<sup>19</sup> Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 34

<sup>20</sup> Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Zelliot *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar* p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> The facsimile of the title page of *The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution*. in Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Book-3. Mumbai: Education Department. Government of Maharashtra.. 1989, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *The Problem of The Rupee* (1923) in *Idem Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Book-3. Mumbai: 1989, pp. 607-613.

<sup>25</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 49.

clear in his initiatives of setting up a welfare association for those affected by untouchability in 1924 called the *Bahiskrit Hitkarini Sabha* and in starting a newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat* in 1927 to make the grievances of Dalits public.<sup>26</sup> It is very interesting to note that as a politician he had a deep interest in religion. This is the chief focus of our study.

## **2. Dr. Ambedkar's Response to Religions**

His response to religion was not merely theoretical; rather he demonstrated its strategic utility in public. It is very interesting to see that while the nationalists were mobilizing masses to protest against Simon Commission Dr. Ambedkar mobilized Dalits to protest against *Manu*.<sup>27</sup> His first public action was to openly burn a copy of *Manusmriti* on the Christmas day of 1927. Composed sometime between 200 B.C.E and 300 C.E. it enumerated the law of the social classes i.e. castes.<sup>28</sup> This act was a protest to the resistance put up by the caste minded people to his march at *Mahad*. This march was to assert the right of Dalits to drink water at the Public Chawdar Lake, which was traditionally prohibited to them. Similarly the Temple Entry Movement at Kalaram Temple, at Nasik in 1930 revealed his resolve to fight against religion for the equal rights of Dalits. He objected to religion's support to inequality and untouchability. We can see that these three i.e. religion, caste and untouchability, were thickly knotted. Dr. Ambedkar explained this interconnection theoretically and demonstrated its social impact by highlighting the function of religion. His view of the function of religion was specific and focused. So let me introduce it here.

People cherish their religion as a source of strength, inspiration, consolation and guidance. Religion also generates a social association at gatherings, festivals and pilgrimages. So we can see religion manifestly in public places but privately individuals are deeply attached to rituals, ceremonies and observances like prayer, fasting and almsgiving.<sup>29</sup> Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that such followers did not think that their religion had anything to do with structuring society but regarded it purely as a matter of personal relationship with God. For Dr. Ambedkar, however, this was not what religion was all about. Emphasizing the social utility of religion he pointed out the irrelevancy of personal piety. He wrote,

Religion becomes a source of positive mischief if not danger when it remains individual, private and personal. Equally mistaken is the view that religion is the flowering of special religious instinct inherent in the nature of the individual. The

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<sup>26</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajendra Kumar Pandey. *Modern Indian Political Thought: Text and Context*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty. *Modern Indian Political Thought*. p. 285.

<sup>28</sup> D.S.Sarma, *Hinduism through the Ages*. Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961, p. 269.

<sup>29</sup> The Gospel of Saint Matthew 6.1-18.

correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society.<sup>30</sup>

In his view religion was not a private affair of individuals but a collective function of society. Here he used 'function' in a specific way in line with what an American scholar Charles A. Ellwood had written.<sup>31</sup> He figured out three functions of religion from these articles,

1. Religion universalizes social values.
2. Religion spiritualizes social values.
3. Religion is an agency of social control.

Now social values for Dr. Ambedkar were dignity, equality, liberty and fraternity.<sup>32</sup> By universalizing these he meant that which has been accepted and practiced globally by its adherents for a long period of time e.g. monogamy among the Christians. In this way religion enables its adherents to accept and to practice its norms in their own particular localities. When individuals do this, they act as approved members of their religious society.<sup>33</sup> By spiritualizing he meant interconnectivity between all things in the universe. So the human life was full of meaning in the chain of cause-and-effect.<sup>34</sup> By social control he meant the moral governance, particularly in controlling human behaviour in society in which injunctions of religion are much more effective than the law and the State.<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar's scrutiny of religion was based on this understanding of function. Clearly, this was a reduced view of what religion was all about. Dr. Ambedkar's rejection of deity as central to religious conviction and as dispensable for doing theology caused him to set aside the mystical, emotional and relational aspect of devotee to his/her deity. Consequently he undermined the rich deposit of knowledge containing reflection and speculation on God, his being, and his action. Later in chapter-2 we will take up these and his other ideas for theorizing on religion in a fuller measure. For Dr. Ambedkar caste system and untouchability were diametrically opposed to justice and freedom. If such system and practice were sanctioned by a religion then he argued that that religion had swerved from the right track.

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<sup>30</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936) idem *Writings and Speeches*. Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 409.

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was closely following the ideas of Charles A. Ellwood from his article *The Religious Reconstruction: A sociological View*. New York: The Macmillan, 1922.

<sup>32</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 411.

<sup>33</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 409.

<sup>34</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 410.

<sup>35</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 411.

In the Round Table Conferences (1931-32) which deliberated on the Indian Constitution, one of the tense issues among others was to assess the standing of the Scheduled Castes in the arena of national politics. Some had proposed that the Hindu Scheduled castes should be counted along with the rest of the Hindus and that they should not be placed on par with other minorities by granting them separate electorates. Dr. Ambedkar was very discontent with this proposal. He knew that the caste system would never make it possible for the Scheduled Castes who had been assimilated into Hinduism to be respected as equals. As a protest at a conference of the Scheduled Castes at Yeola on October 13, 1935, Dr. Ambedkar announced his decision to convert to an egalitarian religion. This became famous as the *Yeola Declaration*.<sup>36</sup> In his conversations with Bishop Pickett on November 24, 1936 he expressed his inability at that time to choose which religion he would embrace, because 'it would risk alienating some who were friendly to him'. From what Bishop Pickett noted in his diary we can see religious feeling surging within him. He noted that Ambedkar seemingly felt that his life was not his own, that he had been given the privilege of an education and other advantages for a reason ... for some special destiny.<sup>37</sup> For reaching this special destiny he wanted a religion that could change the life of those who were affected by untouchability and help them to repossess their *selfhood*. In this study we will trace his search and see what he found. Dr. Ambedkar died on December 6, 1956 in Delhi. His body was flown to Mumbai for the last rites but no State ceremony was extended to him then.<sup>38</sup> Later, after thirty six years in April 1990, he was posthumously honoured with the highest national honour of India, *Bharat Ratna*.

### 3. The Indian Social Context

As we have discussed above, at the heart of the Indian social context is the system of caste. Romila Thapar explains that caste 'requires the existence of hereditary groups determining marriage relations, which are arranged in hierarchical order and perform services for one another. The hierarchy is dependent on occupation, on certain beliefs of purity and pollution, and on continued settlement in a particular geographical location'.<sup>39</sup> Before we consider the social context of India from Dr. Ambedkar's perspective let us see what others have observed about it. I will give just two trustworthy witnesses, Dr. Manmohan Singh, the current Prime Minister of India and the excerpt from the Mandal Commission Report, appointed by the Central government of India in 1978 to study the status of

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<sup>36</sup> Arthur G. McPhee. *Road to Delhi: Bishop J Waskom Pickett Remembered. 1890-1981*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 240.

<sup>37</sup> McPhee. *Road to Delhi*. p. 247.

<sup>38</sup> Ivan Koshtka. 'A Tale of Two Funerals: Ambedkar's and Bal Thakrera's' in *Forward Press*. Vol-IV, No.12, December 2012, New Delhi, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Romila Thapar. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* New Delhi.: Oxford University Press. 2000, p. 11

Backward Castes. Singh paralleling caste discrimination with apartheid said that, "Even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country. Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of untouchability was apartheid."<sup>40</sup> This is evidenced in the *Mandal Commission Report* submitted in 1980 (but was made public only in 1990) in the following paragraph:<sup>41</sup>

Even if the caste model described by us represents an ideal state, yet it does not negate the fact that, the caste system has been the most enduring basis of social organization in India or, that, it has divided the Indian society into a large number of hierarchically arranged high and low castes or, that, the lower castes have suffered crippling social handicaps for centuries as a result of the low caste status. Similarly, despite all the modification that caste has undergone over the ages and, especially after Independence, changes in caste system are representative more of shifts in emphasis than any material alteration in this basic structure.<sup>42</sup>

Granted that social inequality arising out of the caste system has adversely affected the society, the problem is much deeper than this. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that social inequality had three aspects which make the caste system nearly unchangeable. Firstly, one's interiorizing the idea of caste which makes habits part of a culture; secondly, the rootedness of caste system in religion which makes any attempt to change it almost a taboo and thirdly, the beliefs associated with caste system which gives consolation in times of one's anxiety arising out of identity and moral crisis. As a consequence the system of social inequality has become ingrained and internalized by the people. There is another aspect added to this, it is the quality of resilience of the caste system. The Caste system faced serious challenges from Buddhism in antiquity, the spread of Islam in India in the early medieval times, the spread of Christianity in the modern times, and new ideas like democracy and communism that were introduced during the colonial rule—British, French, Portugal, Dutch and Danes. Under these trying circumstances the caste system proved its capacity like an amoeba to shape its contours without diminishing its contents; and so by developing temporary projections it kept pace with a new age and changing culture, passing over the threats of politicians and reformers. It neither lost its relevance nor was it shelved; rather the fact of its resilience had to be reckoned with as society passed through the passages of time and its culture changed from one generation to another. It attended especially to the question of

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<sup>40</sup> *Guardian Weekly* January 5-1.2007

<sup>41</sup> Ghua, *India after Gandhi*. p. 635.

<sup>42</sup> *Mandal Commission Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980*. Section 5.3 Social Dynamics of Caste. New Delhi: Akalank Publications, p. 23.

identity and consciousness – who am I? How can I be righteous? What is my future after I die? And so it kept manifesting itself anew by offering contentment in crisis to every generation. The *Mandal Commission Report* observed that,

Caste has endured over the ages owing to its great resilience; like the proverbial cat, it has nine lives. In fact, no scheme of social organization can survive for long, unless it keeps adjusting with changes in society and is able to produce effective answers to the contemporary problems. It was its basic resilience that enabled caste system to survive the challenges of Buddhism and Islam, the shock of the alien British culture and administration and crusades of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Lohia.<sup>43</sup>

In this way the caste system is interlocked with Indian religions, its cultures, its philosophies and its worldviews. The influence of this is so vast that all sections of populace, every ethnic group and all denominations have been affected by internalizing its basics. The basic element is the caste-based-hierarchical society where Brahmins dominate on all the rest below them i.e. *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, *Shudra* and Dalit. Added to the social hierarchy of caste, is the notion of ritual cleanness. Here some are predestined to be clean castes and others are not. So the distinction between the ‘clean castes’ and ‘polluting castes’ and those falling in between, is also worked out to the minute detail. As a result the habit to maintain distance from the untouchables and to ensure that what is clean is carefully protected from being fouled has boiled down to become culture. Similarly the compulsive mindset to fall into social hierarchy by voluntarily placing one’s group either above or underneath another group, betrays its ingrained feature in culture. This inequality in India is intertwined with the practice of untouchability. Obviously this intertwining is due to the notion of clean and polluted in symbolic world. The consequence of this is that Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are doubly discriminated, firstly in the wider society and secondly by their co-religionists.

Dr. Ambedkar in his time addressed the problem of social inequality and untouchability not only by pioneering reforms and making provisions to compensate the discriminations suffered by Dalits, but he also set example in his personal life when he married Dr. Sharda Kabir, a saraswat Brahmin, on April 15, 1948 in New Delhi under the Civil Marriage Act, long after the death of his first wife.<sup>44</sup> In this act of marriage he showed that a way forward to break the boundries of the caste was to encourage intermarriage among various castes.

As we know since 1951 the Indian Parliament has been making statutory provisions to bring respite to the Dalits and also women.<sup>45</sup> This was chiefly done by reserving seats for the Scheduled Caste candidates. This was done in the State

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<sup>43</sup> Social Dynamics of Caste. Section 5.3 in *Mandal Commission Report* 1980, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 403/4.

<sup>45</sup> Guha. *India after Gandhi*: p. 239; and *Mandal Commission Report* 1980. Section 7.4. p. 29.

institutions for advanced education, professional and technical training. In government departments places were reserved to employ them. Constituencies were also reserved for the Scheduled Caste candidates to contest both for State and National elections. Thus by bringing the extreme sections of populace on par with the advanced sections it was hoped that greater social equality would follow. However, in the passing years these provisions which are in nature compensatory have failed to obliterate the inequality of caste in India's society. Prof Nandu Ram, presently holding the Dr. Ambedkar Chair at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi writes,

During the recent decades, specially after independence of the country, members of the stigmatized castes or ethnic communities have been striving for overcoming the stigma of their collectivity (caste and ethnic community) as well as of their own. Since they are engaged in looking for alternative self and collective or group (caste) identity, they have been making use of two courses of action, rather social processes, which have remained in vogue in Indian society: one, making use of achievements in secular domains like education, caste-free occupations or white collar jobs (economic) and power or authority. But all these three, in actuality, do not replace or obliterate their traditionally stigmatized group or caste identity.<sup>46</sup>

This means that the burden to fight inequality has now been taken up by individuals and social groups in civil society. Therefore, what further should be done? Where shall we go from here? We will explore the answers to these queries in Dr. Ambedkar's writings who wrestled with the problem of social inequality. His writings have become extremely influential. By familiarizing ourselves with his ideas we will be able to see in what respects it can also help us now. This leads us to the area of the relevance of studying Dr. Ambedkar in our times.

#### **4. The Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's views on Religion**

What Dr. Ambedkar wrote on religion should not be assessed only by his social or political accomplishments; rather we should weigh the value of his insights, especially on religion's role for social reform. Sadly, what the social context was in his time solidly remains the same in the twenty first century. These are casteism, communalism and ethnocentrism which restrict the integration of varied people into the national community as equal citizens.<sup>47</sup> As a result of this exclusion of people on the ground of caste and religion, parallel societies are created on the imitation of caste where each group excludes all others. Women, nonetheless, suffer the same

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<sup>46</sup> Nandu Ram. *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India*, Vol-1. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007, p. xxix.

<sup>47</sup> In the Indian society there are three traits that exclude people. These are casteism, communalism and ethnocentrism. Casteism is the practice of caste specific rules and regulations which makes a caste-group distinct from all other groups in the society; communalism connotes rivalry among religious communities in a multi-religious society; ethnocentrism connotes introverted attitude of people that excludes people of other cultures from their ethnic orbit. A common feature of all these three is social exclusion especially in a pluralistic society.



fate at all levels by being subordinated to men, and in this way due to their gender they are doubly disadvantaged. In this division the clean castes have reaped advantages more than the others. This visible disproportion is marked in the social, economic, cultural, political, occupational and educational standing of the *Shudra-Dalit* vis-à-vis the *Brahmin* castes. What Nandu Ram writes in a study conducted to determine the social status of Dalits in the rural south India is an example that demonstrates this point,

The practice of untouchability and other forms of discrimination in their day-to-day relations with people of the other castes and communities still exist in rural areas and small towns.... Not much qualitative and quantitative change is seen in the agrarian wage structure and consequently the greater number of younger generation of scheduled castes or Dalits has become urban oriented during all these years. At the social relational level, greater degree and amount of tension and conflict has emerged between the scheduled and non-scheduled castes as is evident from the large number of caste conflicts between them and the atrocities inflicted on the former in rural areas.<sup>48</sup>

At the background of this excerpt lies the fact that Dalits have been forced to cultivate fields that are not theirs and do unhygienic work which the members of 'clean' castes do not. This has turned caste to be much more than a system of social segregation. It has become a web where occupation, status, labour, economics, residence, ritual and untouchability have become inseparably interlocked. All this is obvious in the exploitative practices of the landowners and capitalists who invariably belong to the clean castes. They neither pay them just wages nor do they share dividends from the profits they create from the cheap labour of Dalits. This problem is reinforced by religion which has endorsed the caste system. This has adversely affected millions of Dalit men and women in the subcontinent. The 2001 census of India reveals that the total population of the Scheduled Castes in the country (excluding the population of Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur) is 166,635,700 which constitute 16.2% of the total Indian population.<sup>49</sup>

The hold of the caste system on the minds of people arises from the worldviews entrenched in the Sanskrit scriptures since the times when the Rig Veda was composed i.e. *circa* 1200 B.C.E.<sup>50</sup> Religion's endorsement of caste has made the exploited Dalits submissive and unresponsive to challenge it in any lasting form. According to the Mandal Commission Report,

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<sup>48</sup> Nandu Ram. *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India*, Vol-1, p. xxxiii.

<sup>49</sup> <[censusindia.gov.in/census\\_And-You/Scheduled\\_Castes\\_And-Scheduled-Tribes.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/census_And-You/Scheduled_Castes_And-Scheduled-Tribes.aspx)> visited on June 6, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. *Hindu Myths*. Harmondsworth. England: Penguin Classics, 1976, p.17.

If religion was ever used as opium of the masses, it was done in India, where a small priest-class, by subtle process of conditioning the thinking of the vast majority of the people, hypnotized them for ages to accepting a role of servility with humility. As labourers, cultivators, craftsman, etc., Shudras were the main producers of social surplus. Their social labour was the life-blood of India's great civilization. Yet socially they were treated as out-castes; they had no right to private property; they carried the main burden of taxes, and the heaviest punishments were awarded to them for minor infringements of the social code. As their low caste status was tied to their birth, they toiled and suffered without any hope.<sup>51</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar's response to religions from the perspective of social inequality makes this study relevant. To counter this social drawback many solutions have been offered. However, there is a difference in what the right wing nationalist offers and what Dr. Ambedkar offers. The former addresses the issue of untouchability but not inequality whereas Dr. Ambedkar primarily attacked inequality. In a nutshell his solutions for untouchability and caste system were compressed in the slogan equality, liberty and fraternity. But then a dilemma which remains unclear in Dr. Ambedkar's writings is this, does society's priority shape religion or does religion shape society? From where do values of justice and freedom emerge? Do they emerge from religion or from society? In Dr. Ambedkar's writings we see that on the one hand he contended that the French revolutionists got their slogan of equality, liberty and fraternity from religion, but on the other hand he held that justice and democracy i.e. community of equals, created a good religion. This dilemma haunts Dr. Ambedkar's readers, but we must keep in mind that his response to religion was chiefly against social inequality and untouchability generated by the caste system and sanctioned by religion.

## 5. Religion, Selfhood and Conversion

It is obvious from his writings that this restoration of the *selfhood* of Dalits necessitated their equality in society. In another place, Dr. Ambedkar expresses the same sentiments and used the word "reclamation of the human personality".<sup>52</sup> The force of these two phrases was the same. It is nevertheless admitted that the word '*selfhood*' appears as a new formulation in the middle of the nineteenth century. The dictionary rendering relates it to 'the quality by virtue of which one is oneself' or its synonym '*ipseity*' meaning personal identity and individuality are unhelpful.<sup>53</sup> These renderings do not explain what this means for Dalits in India. A clearer meaning of

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<sup>51</sup> Mandal Commission Report 1980. 'Social Backwardness and Caste'. Section 4.23, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> McPhee. *Road to Delhi* p. 240. The diary entry is as following: "My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize, have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the *reclamation of the human personality*". (emphasis is added).

<sup>53</sup> New English Dictionary Vol. VIII. Henry Bradkey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.

*selfhood* is to understand it as personal dignity, esteem and confidence. Admittedly for the proper development of these aspects of human personality one needs adequate growth in knowledge, power and will. Clearly these are interior aspects of one's personality which the Dalits could never develop. We know that to develop these every human being needs education and social associations. In this line of thinking we may appreciate that Dr. Ambedkar's slogan: educate, organize and agitate, was apt for Dalits who had become degraded due to centuries of oppression.

In connection with dignity we may well raise the question of using the term 'Untouchable' for Dalits in case it becomes a hurdle for realizing one's *selfhood*. I agree with Simon Charsley<sup>54</sup> that 'Untouchable' is an unfortunate label that connotes devaluation of human beings. I have accordingly preferred to use Dalit throughout this study, except in citations and when inevitable. For a more accurate understanding of Dr. Ambedkar we must recognize the broken condition of the Scheduled castes. We must underline the meaning of *Dalit*. It connotes being pounded by oppression.<sup>55</sup> Dalits need emancipation from this condition of brokenness. In this connection Dr. Ambedkar felt that none except Dalits themselves could recover their dignity. No one else will do this for them. For this they were to be armed both interiorly and exteriorly. Religion empowered them for the former and politics for the later.

Basically *selfhood* has to do with the question of one's identity, who are we?<sup>56</sup> The answer is controlled by two more questions, what do others think we are? And what we do believe to be true of ourselves? Whatever may be the answer to these questions, the essential thing was whether the answers added to one's dignity or degraded them. Now the problem with Dalit identity that deeply affected their *selfhood* was that they were being controlled on religious grounds to believe that they were degraded beings, a condition for which they themselves were to be blamed. The explanation of their degraded identity was offered in the doctrines of *karma* and *dharma*. Having accepted their degraded social status as the consequence of *karma* (deeds of *adharma* they had committed or of *dharma* which they might have omitted in the previous birth), the Dalits are laden with the baggage of shame. This cycle to name and to shame is vicious. Therefore it is important to break this cycle for emancipation. One way to change one's identity is to change one's name. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that Dalits do change their names but he observed that the way they do this failed to restore their dignity. He wrote,

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<sup>54</sup> Simon R. Charsley. 'Beyond Untouchability? Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide' in *Ambedkar, Dalits and Buddhism* (Edt). Nandu Ram. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt Ltd. 2008, p. 154.

<sup>55</sup> Zelliot *From Untouchable to Dalit*, p. vii.

<sup>56</sup> John C.B. Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*. New Delhi. Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2002, p.112.

There is a fixed attitude towards 'Untouchables' which is determined by the stink which is imbedded in the name 'Untouchable'. People have no mind to go into the individual merits of each Untouchable no matter how meritorious he is. All untouchables realize this. There is a general attempt to call themselves by some other than the 'Untouchables'. The Chamars call themselves Ravidas or Jatavas. The Doms call themselves Shilpkars. The Pariahs call themselves Adi-dravidas, the Madigas call themselves Arundhataya, the Mahars call themselves Chokhmela or Somavanshi and the Bhangis call themselves Balmikis. All of them if away from their localities would call themselves Christians.<sup>57</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar called this ineffective change of name 'protective discoloration' which often had failed to serve its purpose. So we may well ask what else could be done. His answer to this query was to convert to an egalitarian religion. Conversion in his view involved two things: one, changing allegiance to a new community of faith and two, changing interiorly. This was fundamental to redefining one's identity.<sup>58</sup> Attention should be *Drawn* to the fact that starting from *Yeola Declaration* he continuously for the next twenty years, advocated conversion of Dalits to an egalitarian religion. In this line of advocacy he underlined three reasons for Dalits to convert,

1. To end social isolation.
2. To remove inferiority complex.
3. To raise general social status.

The cure for social isolation was to join a religion where Dalits would be welcomed as equal members of the community. Such kinship would also extend security to Dalits in time of crisis, when other members would join in solidarity and support.

Inferiority complex, for Dr. Ambedkar, was a deep mental condition arising out of segregation, prejudice and hostility.<sup>59</sup> The remedy for this mental condition was conversion to another highlighted the role of religion to universalize human feelings, just like reason rationalizes human ideas.<sup>60</sup> When human will and emotions were projected and harmonized with similar feelings of other people universally, it encouraged hope and confidence in life's struggle. This was essential to cure the inferiority complex of Dalits.

As far as the alleviation of the general social status was concerned, Dr. Ambedkar advocated a change in name. As 'Untouchable' was a bad name with a stink, the strategy was to change it. But this was not to be a cosmetic change; rather the new name had to be from outside the Hindu fold, 'beyond its power of spoliation and

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<sup>57</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 419.

<sup>58</sup> Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation*. pp. 107-109.

<sup>59</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), pp. 413-419.

<sup>60</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 409.

degradation' he wrote.<sup>61</sup> This brings us back to the subject of conversion to repossess the *selfhood* which is where we had started our discussion of this section. So we see that in Dr. Ambedkar's thinking religion, *selfhood* and conversion were essentially interconnected. Change was needed to in all these three aspects for truly emancipating Dalits.

## 6. Aim and Contents of this Study

This study does not aim to produce Dr. Ambedkar's biography, but to bring out his theoretical approach to religion. By far the most detailed biography is by Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* first published in 1954 and since then has been reprinted several times.<sup>62</sup> A drawback of Keer's work is his obvious disapproval of missionary enterprise to convert Dalits to Christianity<sup>63</sup> which was not Dr. Ambedkar's view as such. In the year 2000 a feature film "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar" directed by Jabbar Patel was released. It is a good movie based on his biography.<sup>64</sup> As far as my work is concerned, it focuses on Dr. Ambedkar's response to religions by assessing their worth. Although the issue of caste and untouchability are intertwined with religion, I focus on these only because it is unavoidable. My interest was not to study the caste system as such but religion. Curiously in India the religious practices of caste and untouchability are concurrent to the problem of social inequality. Other issues connected with religions are communal conflicts, nationalism, ethics, culture, politics, conversion, social order and *dharma*.<sup>65</sup>

This study is divided into ten chapters. Beginning with this Introduction, Dr. Ambedkar's method of assessing religion is taken up exhaustively in chapter two. In this chapter we will see that his reductionist approach turns religion into a component of society. In this way he not only misses out on the breathtaking scope that religions offer to the world, but his limited view makes his assessment unfair from the standpoint of some religions. Subsequently chapters three to nine deal with his response to various religions. Here we will see that Dr. Ambedkar's assessment on religion was one sided, yet his assertion that religion transmits the basic values of human life which also helps to structure our society and are also used to maintain a status quo, is a valid point. The layout of this study is not meant to suggest that he

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<sup>61</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 420.

<sup>62</sup> Other biographical writings are as following: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar entry in Encyclopedia of Asian History (Editor Ainslee Embree) New York: Charles Scribners Sons. 1988; D.C. Ahir. *Life of Dr. Ambedkar*. Delhi: BR Publishing. 1990; Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* ((translated by Asha Damle) New Delhi: National Book Trust India, 2007; Nanak Chand Rattu. *Little Known Facts of Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Focus Impressions, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Keer's expresses his opinion about the missionary enterprise like this, 'The Christian missionaries fully exploited this situation. they took up the cause of the education of lower classes as also of the Untouchables; of course, with an ulterior motive, and began to disseminate education among them.' Cf. Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> This feature film was funded both by the central government's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the State government of Maharashtra.

<sup>65</sup> The Sanskrit word *dharma* connotes one's duty at one's stage of life and status in the caste system.

dealt with each of these sequentially on a time-line. What is true, however, is that he did respond to each of these for different reasons at different times. The aim of my study is to bring out his struggle and dilemmas with religion with a degree of clarity. We can identify three milestones in his effort:

- The first milestone December 25, 1927: Burning of *Manusmriti*, the religious book of caste laws. From this time onward he wrote about religion as the cause for caste based inequality.<sup>66</sup>
- The second milestone October 13, 1935: *Yeola* Declaration. At a conference of the Depressed Classes in Yeola town he declared his intention to convert to an egalitarian religion.<sup>67</sup>
- The third milestone May 4, 1951: Foundation of Buddhist Society of India. He commenced compiling the life and teachings of Buddha in a book, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, which he composed in style of the gospels and was published posthumously.<sup>68</sup>

These milestones show the extent to which Dr. Ambedkar challenged the mighty power of the Indian culture—the caste system, which even the British in India had feared to touch. Coincidentally these years had larger political significance. The seven-member Commission under John Simon was constituted in 1927 to see what further political reforms were needed to govern India. But Dr. Ambedkar's action highlights the significance of social rather than political reform. Similarly the Government of India Act which was passed by the British Parliament in 1935, aimed to share political power with Indian leaders albeit in a restricted manner. Over and against this Dr Ambedkar in his *Yeola* Declaration protested that the Scheduled Castes had no share in this unless they changed their religion. While the Indian President in office, Rajendra Prasad, inaugurated the renovated *Somnath Temple* in Gujarat in spring 1951, Dr. Ambedkar's initiative in the same year by founding the Buddhist Society of India offers a counter point to the symbolic state-patronage extended to a religion deemed to be exclusively Indian.<sup>69</sup> In other words he showed that no single religion had the right to claim to be the traditional culture of India. Granted that these activities made him popular among the Dalit masses, however, the question to ask is this, why was he, unlike Gandhi and Nehru his contemporaries, not known in the larger world? The first reason is that he did not have a person of stature to promote him. Gandhi had western friends like C.F. Andrews, an Anglican priest, to

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<sup>66</sup> Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar*. p. 101.

<sup>67</sup> Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar*. p. 252.

<sup>68</sup> It is Volume-11 in the series of Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Mumbai: 1992.

<sup>69</sup> Ramachandra Guha. *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. New Delhi: Picador, 2008, p. 131.

do this for him.<sup>70</sup> The second is that most of his articles were neither published nor widely circulated till after 1979.<sup>71</sup> This corpus constitutes the primary source published in twenty-one volumes under the title, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* by the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra State in India, totaling between 12,500 and 13,000 printed pages in the seventeen volumes of English only. The other three volumes i.e. eighteen to twenty are his writings in his first language Marathi and volume twenty one is a selection of facsimile of his hand written English manuscripts.

Each volume has been forwarded from the desk of the Minister of Higher Education and other Ministers of the State Government. The publication of each volume had been under a properly constituted committee of twenty four scholars appointed by the State Government. Dr. Vasant W. Moon in capacity of the Officer on Special Duty (OSD) was involved in this project as the compiler of most volumes. These were printed at the Government Press in Mumbai. The object of this publication was not only to compile Dr. Ambedkar's writings on variety of topics but to make these available to the reading population at every level of society at an affordable price. The publishing work has been going on since 1982 till the twenty-first volume was published in 2006. Moreover these volumes are a wealth of narratives, reports, speeches, interviews, schemes, proposals, ideas, press interviews and statements on a variety of topics that Dr. Ambedkar left with us. All these over a period of time were published in separate places but many were left unpublished in a box, which after his death were immediately placed first under the custody of the Delhi High Court and then transferred to the Administrator General of the Government of Maharashtra till the formation of the Editorial Board under the State Minister of Education.

Now we should be careful not to assume that his writings are exclusively or predominantly on religion. The fact is that the impressive corpus of what he wrote in this field, constitute only a part of his total writings in these volumes. In these twenty-one volumes all his articles were compiled not strictly in a chronological sequence. However it was not possible for the compilers and the OSD to determine the date of writing for many Articles. Mostly they have collected his articles under themes. This places some limit to get a full view of some discussions, but the year of writings can be worked out from the internal evidences of footnotes or the events he has referred to in those articles. Accordingly I have worked out some dates of his articles that I have used in this study yet knowing well that these are approximations. Some examples are as below,

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<sup>70</sup> Judith M. Brown. *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*. London: Yale University Press. 1989. p. 60.

<sup>71</sup> See title page of Volume-1 in the series of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Mumbai: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1989.

- I have put 1936 for *Away from the Hindus* based on the event that Dr. Ambedkar had mentioned in the first paragraph, 'At a Conference of the Mahars held in Bombay on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1936...' <sup>72</sup>
- I regard 1938 for *Civilization or Felony* as this date occurs at the foot note.<sup>73</sup>
- I put 1941 for the article *Philosophy of Hinduism* as the year occurs in his footnote in reference to a book and his reference to Nazi the phrase, 'This is what the Nazis have done.' suggests that Hitler (1933-45) was still alive.<sup>74</sup>
- I have put 1946 for *Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles* from his foot note where he has referred to his own books *Who were the Shudras?* published in 1946. The point being that the manuscript of the former book must have been prepared after the year of the publication of the latter.
- For *Riddles of Hinduism, The Buddha and His Dhamma, Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India and Buddha and Karl Marx* I regard 1956 as dependable as it is noted by Nanak Chand Rattu in his book *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*.<sup>75</sup> These books must have been prepared between 1951 and 1956.

This focus on Dr. Ambedkar's views on religion is of importance in itself. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Dr. Ambedkar's engagement with religion has not been dealt exhaustively in a single volume. The treatment of religion strewn in various books in piecemeal fashion is inadequate to do justice to his concern. I have listed some of these in the footnote.<sup>76</sup> In his own work, the subject of religion occurs in those articles which discuss the problem of caste system though some books are wholly on religion. For example in volume-1 of *Writings and Speeches* the first two articles, *Castes in India* (1916) and *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) are dedicated to discussion of Caste. Whereas Volume-4 and 11 are full length religious books titled *Riddles of Hinduism* (1956) and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956) which take up the

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<sup>72</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p.403.

<sup>73</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p.140.

<sup>74</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), pp.75 & 86.

<sup>75</sup> Nanak Chand Rattu, *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Focus Impressions. 2001, p. 217.

<sup>76</sup> Here is a list of selected books that deal with Dr.. Ambedkar's Response to religions.

1. T.S.Wilkinson and M.M.Thomas. *Ambedkar and The Neo-Buddhist Movement*. Chennai: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. Bangalore and The Christian Literature Society. 1972.
2. Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.1992, pp. 266-284.
3. John C.B.Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*: New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.. 2002, pp. 35-74.
4. James Massey. *Dr.. B.R. Ambedkar: A Study in Just Society*. New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies & Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2003, pp. 24-62.
5. Eleanor Zelliot. *Ambedkar's Conversion*. New Delhi: Critical Books. 2005.
6. Eleanor Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2005, pp. 187-261.
7. J.A. David Onesimus. *Dr. Ambedkar's Critique towards Christian Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: ISPCK.. 2008, pp. 5-38.
8. K. David Pandyan. *Dr. Ambedkar and the Dynamics of New-Buddhism*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House. 2009.



problem of caste also. The insights on religion strewn in all these varied articles I have presented in an organized way in this study. Secondly, the application of the result of this study will break new grounds in the field of theology and religious studies with reference to society. The research will also be useful in the study of religions in India from Dalit perspective and challenge religions to review their role in the Indian context.

From what I have discussed, we can see Dr. Ambedkar in multiple roles. As a scholar he was an avid reader, researcher and a writer of many books. As a jurist he supervised the drafting the Indian Constitution<sup>77</sup> and as a statesman was responsible for including the Fundamental Rights for the Indian citizens in the Constitution of India.<sup>78</sup> These are but few instances of his varied contributions to show my point. This again affirms that his line of action was political which is evident in the methods he employed to accomplish his aims. He founded three political parties, the Independent Labour Party in 1936, the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942 and the Republican Party in 1956, which has politicized the Dalits.<sup>79</sup> Other political methods he used were of organizing rallies, public gatherings, protests, public speeches and participation in political processes, demonstrations, and conferences, publications of newspapers and journals, and even religious conversion. In some instances he strategically reversed his earlier positions on political demands.<sup>80</sup> However he never deviated from his aim to use political strategies to reform religion, and to construct a just society. In all that he wrote on religion lay his mission to establish egalitarian society. It was this yearning that led him to assess various religions which he regarded as the foundation for social structures. The question before him was if religion was the foundation of society, then which one should he and his people adopt? But before we answer this question which will cover seven chapters of this study, we should first grasp his philosophy which he set out as the basis for theorizing religion in the context of India.

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<sup>77</sup> Keer, Dr. Ambedkar p. 413.

<sup>78</sup> *The Constitution of India* Part-III. There are seven Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution: Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right against Exploitation, Right to Freedom to Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights and Right to Constitutional Remedies.

<sup>79</sup> Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 70-71.

<sup>80</sup> Zelliot gives interesting details about this. She writes about Dr. Ambedkar that, 'At this Nagpur conference shortly before he left for London, Ambedkar stated that he would be satisfied with joint electorates provide that there was adult franchise and reserved seats. Earlier, in 1919, he had asked for separate electorates, as did Jains, Marahas, Lingayats, Marwaris and a number of other groups in a sort of separate electorate fever, but in 1928, before the Simon Commission, he reversed his position. There he used the argument against separate electorates which Gandhi was later to use against him—that this would result in increased disunity'. Cf. Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 103.

## Chapter Two

### Dr. Ambedkar's Dilemma with Religion

#### 1. Introduction

Dr. Ambedkar believed that religion could help Dalits to reclaim their lost *selfhood* provided it was of the right kind. But how was one to assess this? The search for the answer took him on an extraordinary course of intellectual stimulation. John Webster, who writes Indian subaltern history, points out that Dr. Ambedkar's well developed and finely articulated ideas<sup>81</sup> make valuable reading material.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps we would mention here that Dr. Ambedkar took three books as his source to develop his ideas on the subject of religion to a degree of sophistication. These were *The Tree of Life* by Ernest Crowley (1905) and *The Reconstruction of Religion* by Charles Ellwood (1922), and *The Religion of the Semites* by W. Robertson Smith (1927). These three have been surveyed by Webster and therefore it is not necessary to go on to examine these sources. Admittedly Dr. Ambedkar regarded his approach to the subject of religion as philosophical. Like the influence of the Greek philosophers in the West, he knew the persuasion of philosophical thinking in India. Philosophers use reason to argue their point of view. Similarly Dr. Ambedkar intended to use reason to put religion on trial. He stressed two aspects to philosophy, namely, descriptive and normative. The former was the expressive teachings of a philosopher and the latter was critical reasoning to assess the worth of those teachings. He argued that a Philosophy of Religion too should use critical reason to assess the worth of a religion. He wrote,

I am using the word Philosophy in its original sense which was two-fold. It meant as it did when people spoke of the philosophy of Socrates, or the philosophy of Plato. In another sense it meant critical reason used in passing judgements upon things and events. Proceeding on this basis Philosophy of Religion is to me not merely descriptive science. I regard it as being both descriptive as well as normative. In so far as it involves the use of critical reason for passing judgement on those teachings, the Philosophy of Religion becomes a normative science.<sup>83</sup>

In Dr. Ambedkar's view the role of critical reasoning was vital to establish norms in religion, which in turn would be essential for social reforms. At the heart of this lies his view on religion. Although his perspective on religion had matured when he

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<sup>81</sup> John C.B. Webster 'Dr. Ambedkar's View of Religion' in *Religion and Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2002, p. 35

<sup>82</sup> Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation* . pp. 35-30

<sup>83</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai:1987, p. 5.

wrote *Philosophy of Hinduism* sometime between 1941 and 1945, we see its seminal form in his paper *Castes in India* which he had written for an anthropological seminar paper in 1916. Moreover his boldness to burn the *Manusmriti* in 1927 resulted out of his ripe ideas in this field by this time. This conceptual clarity comes through in his article *Annihilation of Caste* which he wrote in 1936. For this reason in this chapter I have used primarily these sources but in order to show that he was consistent in his line of thinking, I have referred to some other articles of later years also.

There is another interesting consistency that I have noticed in Dr. Ambedkar's style of reasoning. There is a correspondence in his logical style on economic issues and issues affecting society. For instance in his doctoral thesis *The Problem of the Rupee* (1923), he pointed out that the British colonial government in India had insisted to use the silver standard for the Rupee. This was detrimental for the Indian economy. In a similar style he argued that the insistence of religious tradition to use the caste system as divinely endorsed was injurious for the Indian society. Here his insight was to specifically identify that idea or concept whose power had made people helpless. This in the context of Indian society was the caste system just as the silver standard for the rupee was to the Indian economy. Furthermore, just as an economy could be improved by a return to the gold standard, similarly society could benefit by returning to the original aims of religion. On this line of reasoning he developed a very interesting theory of religion demonstrating that the original purpose of religion was also its norms. What this exactly means will become clear as we proceed with our discussion in this chapter. Whatever may be the merits and demerits of this point the fact is that social relationships are not exactly like economics and social institutions do not circulate like silver coins. However, as Dr. Ambedkar had put religion on an economic tramline, we collide headlong with some dilemmas.

## **2. Dilemma with Norms**

People need norms for making ethical decisions. Norms are standards that guide us to either undertake a course of action or to refrain from doing so. Dr. Ambedkar was aware of the diversity of norms in societies. Different religions and their worldviews which constituted different societies offered diverse norms. So people of different societies behaved and acted in different ways. We know that besides the most obvious differences in things like food, dress and language, there are differences in customs surrounding birth, marriage and death, and views of life especially in a pluralistic society like India.<sup>84</sup> However, in order to respond to religions Dr. Ambedkar needed a fixed and trusted point to view and to weigh religious traditions. For this, therefore, let us draw our attention to Dr. Ambedkar's

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<sup>84</sup> Hendrik M. Vroom. *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, p.1.

line of reasoning. Let us see how his perspectives as an economist helped him to articulate his insights on religion also. We can say that just as a fiducial standard is needed to determine the value of coins, so also as an analyst he needed norms to test religions. Now if Dr. Ambedkar were to have such a fiducial norm to respond to religious traditions, it needed to come from a source beyond current religions. Indeed he found two norms for this purpose, which he claimed did not come from religion but from society. Now society survives beyond all religious traditions and cultures. In this sense society transcends individuals, cultures and religions. It was therefore a reliable place to seek moral norms. So let us follow his arguments more closely.

Dr. Ambedkar till the end of his life held that the aim of religion was to preach and propagate that which constituted a good life.<sup>85</sup> But religious traditions were not unanimous in their understanding of what exactly they held to be good. Dr. Ambedkar explained the problem like this,

Religions may be alike in that they all teach that the meaning of life is to be found in the pursuit of 'good'. But religions are not alike in their answers to the question 'What is good?' In this they certainly differ. One religion holds that brotherhood is good, another caste and untouchability is good.<sup>86</sup>

Keeping in view that different religious traditions offered different ideas of 'good', the problem that Dr. Ambedkar had to solve was this, what was the correct view of good? He held that the answer was embedded in the history of religion i.e. the study of the changes that occurred in religious traditions over a period of time as society evolved. With this in view Dr. Ambedkar commenced to map the advancement of society over several millennia. He wished to show that religious traditions astonishingly changed as society advanced from one stage to the next and so did the norms. He held that three stages of social advancement gave rise to three kinds of societies over a long period of time. These were the primal society, the antique society and the modern society respectively. The concern of religion in each of these three stages of society became distinct from the previous stage and so did its norms. He identified three distinct concerns of religion in each corresponding stage. In the primal stage of society the concern of religion was to conserve life, in the antique stage it was to preserve society and in the modern stage it was to protect individual's interest. At every stage of society's advancement each concern was good for its time and context. He further condensed these three concerns into two norms: *utility* and *justice*. The fact that he had lifted this idea directly from John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

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<sup>85</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Away from the Hindus' (1936) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 405 and 'Smarth Dharm' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p.182.

<sup>86</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Away from the Hindus' (1936) p. 405.

who was famous for his utilitarian philosophy<sup>87</sup> is evident from his acknowledgement that “Mill pointed out (that) there is no necessary antagonism between justice and utility.”<sup>88</sup> We will study more about these two norms in the sections below, but here we must draw our attention to the two advantages of these norms. The first advantage was that they were moral and the second was they were useful for society and for individuals. However, a problem arises when we think of applying them in our times because there are obvious contradictions in them. Perhaps Dr. Ambedkar was to an extent aware of the objections that one could raise but he went ahead to use these like a litmus test of religions. Indeed with these norms in place he said what he wanted the people to hear. Along with his brilliant analysis of religions we will also discuss the dilemmas inherent in Dr. Ambedkar’s method.

### **2.1 Between Life and Right**

As we have seen above, the concern of religion in the primal society in Dr. Ambedkar’s view was to conserve life. So let us workout his line of reasoning by briefly looking at the primeval human society as he had viewed. In the primal society when the human species had neither philosophy nor science they were at a loss to explain the natural occurrences which they used to experience. Life in nature encountered them simultaneously with delight and dread filling them with wonder and anxiety. For instance birth and death, rain and flood, lightning and thunder. Two things about human species were clear from the start: exceptional intelligence and feeble bodies. This made the human beings dependent on one another for their sustenance and survival.

In these primeval stages human beings must have had to encounter the dread and anxiety of extinction with an interior compulsion to conserve the wonder and delight of life. In this situation human beings needed two things: their rituals and their group. They needed the former to acknowledge the sacredness of life and the latter to protect their life. Life needed both, to be hallowed and conserved. Now society was the collective group which offered both. To each individual it offered protection-cum-sustenance, at the same time rituals offered interior confidence and a sense of wellbeing. The evil of destructive powers of nature and diseases were driven out by rituals of magic and totems which eventually gave rise to religion. And so religion through its rituals sanctified life driving out the harmful powers. By rituals Dr. Ambedkar did not imply the cult of deity in this stage. The role of God in religion was to come only at a later stage. Although the crudeness of the religion of the primal society has vanished in our modern society, but Dr. Ambedkar drew

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<sup>87</sup> Bertrand Russell. *A History of Western Philosophy*. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1988, p. 743.

<sup>88</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ (1941), p. 66.

attention to the idea of sanctification as the underlying intention, which in his view had remained unchanged in religion till the modern times. Dr. Ambedkar wrote,

The principal thing in the religion of the savage are the elemental facts of human existence such as life, birth, marriage etc., magic, tabu and totem are not the ends. They are only the means. The end is life and preservation of life. Magic, tabu etc, are resorted to by the Savage society not for their own sake but to conserve life and to exercise (*sic!* exorcise) evil influence from doing harm to life.<sup>89</sup>

In Dr. Ambedkar's view religion did one more thing. It provided morality as a guide for people to behave. In the primal society to conserve life became the moral obligation of all people. Religion by using taboos curbed those actions, behaviour and relationships which were believed to be harmful for life. He held that just as through the rituals religion sanctified or consecrated life, similarly through morality it sanctioned rules to conserve life. Clearly life and society were knit: without life there could be no society yet without society there could be no life.

Both religion and morality are connected with the same elemental facts of human existence—namely life, death, birth and marriage. Religion consecrates these life processes, while morality furnishes rules for their preservation. Religion in consecrating the elemental facts and processes of life came to consecrate also the rules laid down by society for their preservation.<sup>90</sup>

We must note two more things in Dr. Ambedkar's thinking about the primal society. The first thing is that individuals and society were undifferentiated in this stage and the second thing is that personal interests were subservient to the collective advantage of the society. Therefore, whatever was perceived as beneficial for the society was regarded as good for the individuals too and whatever was advantageous to the society was given preference over and against any individual's interest. Individuals had no rights for themselves as such. Dr. Ambedkar held that conservation-of-life was the intention of religion in this stage which was good and morally correct for those times. This fundamental point of his reasoning is applicable for the wider society too. According to him 'what was true of the religion of the savage was true of all religions wherever they were found for the simple reason that (it) constitutes the essence of religion'.<sup>91</sup>

Granted that the relevance of rituals for sanctifying life in the primal society has relevance and use even in the modern age, he does not explain if these rituals, by subjugating individual's interests, could stop the breaking up of tribes in to smaller

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<sup>89</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'Away from the Hindus' (1936) p.405.

<sup>90</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai,1987, p.12.

<sup>91</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.11.

units. In such cases there could have been internecine or intertribal conflicts. Here, the assertion of some members of the tribe to differ from the rest, when exercised as a right, would break-up a tribe giving rise to another tribe. Also, the intertribal conflicts even in its primitive forms of genocide indicate the assertion of right by the members of one tribe over the other. Dr. Ambedkar does not take into consideration the existence of multiple tribes in a territory. Consequently we are faced with the dilemma in his argument i.e. between conserving life as a collective concern and asserting of rights by its individual members.

From this primal stage, society stepped into a civilized stage. Dr. Ambedkar held that this development was in two distinct stages i.e. the antique and the modern stages. He also held that as society progressively stepped into a civilized stage, so did religion. Interestingly we see some dilemmas there too.

## **2.2 Between Personal and Collective Benefits**

Religion went through a change when primal society stepped into the antique stage. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the new aspect which got associated with religion in this stage was the concept of God. He drew attention to religion's distinctive features in the antique phase which were essential to preserve society. These were the invention of alphabets,<sup>92</sup> the belief in God,<sup>93</sup> focus on ethnic deities,<sup>94</sup> and obedience to the divine commands.<sup>95</sup> The performance of the prescribed rituals in a precise manner was both an act of personal obedience as well as public duty in the society. The point here was that in the antique stage the concern of religion dovetailed the concern of society. With the idea that God was inalienable from religion, Dr. Ambedkar argued that the performance of rituals was in obedience to God's command. Rituals in the antique society were private but more importantly civil. These were publicly done as sponsored by the government. This was so because deity was perceived as one who watched over the civic life and gave the boon of harvest, vintage, peace and victory.<sup>96</sup>

The religion of the antique society looked very different from our modern ones. Personal conviction and devotion did not count, what mattered was one's obligation to participate in the civil ritual. The appeasement of deity was purely for social advantage or utility. So the deities, for instance the goddess of fertility or of learning or the god of thunder and storms, were appeased by public rituals. In case of the conflict of interest between an individual's benefit and society's advantage, the deity did not take interest in the individual. To magnify this point, I would place the injunction of the Law of Moses for leprosy patients under Dr. Ambedkar's lens.

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<sup>92</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 88.

<sup>93</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.12.

<sup>94</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.14-15.

<sup>95</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.17.

<sup>96</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.19.

Under the sanction of religion the person affected by leprosy was removed from the public places as the patient's presence was perceived as a threat to the good of society.<sup>97</sup> Here the good should be understood as ritual purity to which the unclean condition of leprosy was a hazard. Clearly, in this case the deity was not concerned with the helpless patient. Compassion was not in deity's nature. In this line of concern, the action of isolating the patient was regarded as beneficial for the whole community and therefore it was moral.

From these features Dr. Ambedkar inferred that religion's social usefulness in the antique society was its concern for the preservation-of-society. From this he deduced that *utility* was the norm which was sanctified by the religion of antique society. This norm, in his view, was still valid for religions in his contemporaneous society. Therefore, he decided to use this norm to judge whether the scheme of governance offered by a religion for its adherents was good or not. In this way he universalized the norm. He wrote,

Utility as a criterion was appropriate to the antique world in which society being the end, the moral good was held to be something which had social utility.<sup>98</sup>

However, the problem of accepting Dr. Ambedkar's way of universalizing *utility* is that the individual's secondary status is given an aura of legitimacy for all time. He glossed over instances where social interests were set aside for acts of compassion. We come across instances of these in the religious traditions of antiquity. Here Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is a case in point.<sup>99</sup> In this parable the act of compassion by an alien bridges the socio-cultural gulf between the Jews and the Samaritans. Now in Dr. Ambedkar's scale of time Jesus was in the antique society when *utility* could not have allowed an individual act of compassion to overrule the collective interest. In that society the collective interest in purity would have been the guiding force. But it is precisely this which was challenged in Jesus' parable. We are inevitably faced with this dilemma in Dr. Ambedkar's argument. Nonetheless, Dr. Ambedkar's oversights, as well as his insights, into the religion of antique society were similar to his views on Primal Religion. In his view both societies were concerned with what they perceived as useful for their conserving and preserving life and society.

In Dr. Ambedkar's scheme of history, society took a progressive leap from the antique stage and stepped onto the modern stage. Along with it religion also stepped into modernity. This step in his reckoning was revolutionary.

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<sup>97</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.20.

<sup>98</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.22.

<sup>99</sup> The Gospel of Luke 10.30-37.



### 2.3 Between Justice and Utility

Dr. Ambedkar identified ten shifts marking revolutionary transitions in religion from antiquity to modernity. Interestingly the time line that begins from antiquity extraordinarily extends to the second millennia of the Common Era. As these 'shifts' can be represented by a list of ten radical changes so we will call it Dr. Ambedkar's *ten-shifts hypothesis*.<sup>100</sup> These shifts that changed the norms of religion can be listed as following:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> shift was the elimination of God from the social composition to the periphery. This was over and against the antique society where gods formed a socio-political and religious whole.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> shift was the perception of God as universal. This was a complete change from the idea of parochial divinities in antiquity.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> shift replaced the notion of the physical fatherhood of God with the idea of God as the creator. Consequently God as a governor of the universe was credited to be good.
- The 4<sup>th</sup> shift replaced proselytizing into a religion from naturalization into a society. Consequently change of religion no more entailed change in citizenship.
- The 5<sup>th</sup> shift distinguished between acquiring knowledge of divine laws in order to obey them, from engagement in speculative exercise to gain understanding of the nature of the deity.
- The 6<sup>th</sup> shift placed theoretical working out of the system of belief, prior to the performance of fixed tradition of practices.
- The 7<sup>th</sup> shift placed individual conviction, prior to the observance of religious rituals. Unlike the antiquity society, the individuals in the modern society prefer to work out their convictions and reason out their beliefs prior to their engagement in their religious practices.
- The 8<sup>th</sup> shift removed religion from public domain to private. No more public ceremonies were compulsory to appease gods for harvest or victory.
- The 9<sup>th</sup> shift related God to each individual rather than to meet collective need. This was over and against the idea that God had an indifferent attitude to individual as long as *his* community flourished. In fact the sufferings of an individual were perceived as a sign of deity's displeasure with that person.
- The 10<sup>th</sup> shift involved God, albeit privately, to sort out personal problem or even help out in situation where a person was in conflict with the state. This shift was over and against the perception that God could not be appealed for the vindication of a righteous cause if it collided with the state's interest.

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<sup>100</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 14-20.

Using this hypothesis he explained how deity's role changed in the modern society. Local deities were replaced by a moral God of all people<sup>101</sup> and the idea that human beings were created in God's image also was incorporated in religion. This being the case, people could change their nationalities without changing gods and vice versa.<sup>102</sup> It may strike us that Dr. Ambedkar was an economist and that economists do not take up religion as a subject for their discussions in the way he did. The fact is that after being nominated in the Bombay Legislative Council in 1926 as the representative of the Scheduled Castes, Dr. Ambedkar took to politics in a serious way, and religion in his view was important in this arena.<sup>103</sup> Obviously the impact of some extraordinary events had changed his interest from economics to politics and religion. To get a clearer picture let us note some global developments at this point of time which had left its mark on the way he perceived society and politics and role of religion in society. This comes out in a monograph *Philosophy of Hinduism* which Dr. Ambedkar wrote sometime between 1941 and 1945.

In this lengthy monograph where he developed his hypothesis of the ten revolutionary shifts in religion, his perspective on religion had philosophically matured. The world since 1913, when he had started his advanced education in the United States, had completely changed by 1945. It made him realize that economics and security were not solely the cause for bringing changes in society. There were other factors too like the yearning of self dignity and reclamation of *selfhood* by the suppressed people. In these radical socio-political changes a common thread was the issue of the rights of the suppressed people especially the Blacks and the working classes. The colonized people of the British Empire inspired by Mahatma Gandhi in India had challenged the British Empire by demanding *swaraj* i.e. right to self-rule. The Dalits, Tribal and Africans in large numbers had converted to Christianity. This broke down its euro-centric insulation and turned had it into a world religion. The spiritual heritage and philosophical riches of the eastern religions were now accessible to the western intellectuals. The translation of their ancient literature into European language, pioneered by orientalist like Max Müller, made it available outside the small circle of Indologists. The working classes, exploited by the capitalists were gaining political power under the socialists and the communists. Many old Christian and Buddhist countries had turned to communism inspired by the ideologies of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. The international borders of countries were redrawn in many places due to these revolutions. Democracy was not an accepted ideal in large parts of the world. The reign of the third Reich had ended with the suicide of Adolf Hitler in 1945. Granted that under the inspiration of people

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<sup>101</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.14-15.

<sup>102</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.17.

<sup>103</sup> Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. 'A Biographical Sketch' (1943). idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-10, 1991, p. 7.

like Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and Martin Luther King Junior (1929-68) society had been revolutionarily transformed, for Dr. Ambedkar revolutions were not peculiar to the twentieth century alone. Rather revolutions though unnoticed have been making headway since the antiquity. One such ongoing revolution was in religion, which we have called Dr. Ambedkar's *ten-shifts hypothesis*. This had an impact on society too.

The insight that God was a moral being was one of the revolutionary shifts of Dr. Ambedkar's hypothesis. According to it, the individual in the religion of modern society resorted to the deity seeking just intervention when they were wronged. This indicated a change in religion's concern. Protection of personal interest now superseded religion's concern to preserve society's benefit. Dr. Ambedkar regarded this change in priority i.e. protecting an individual's interest as *justice*. This change of concern in religion led to moral change in it as well. To do justice to an individual was regarded as moral. This was sanctified by the religion of modern society.

*Justice* as a criterion became appropriate to modern world in which individual being the end, the moral good was held to be something which does justice to the individual.<sup>104</sup>

However, what he completely failed to take into account at this juncture was the role of fairness in administering justice. He eventually did take this into account. We will turn to it later in our discussion. Dr. Ambedkar contended that at this point in time of society's progress, *utility* and *justice* constituted social morality. According to him,

The norm or the criterion, for judging right and wrong in the Antique Society was *utility* while the norm or the criterion for judging right and wrong in the modern Society is *justice*.<sup>105</sup>

*Justice* and *utility* which corresponded to meaning and order in society in Dr. Ambedkar's view were to be held together.<sup>106</sup> But if we accept this view then it is not quite clear what would happen when *justice* collided with *utility*? Obviously there would be cases where collective good would not be in the interest of an individual and *vice versa*.

Although Dr. Ambedkar left his dilemma unresolved, it is not difficult to appreciate the reason why Dr. Ambedkar held the two i.e. *utility* and *justice* as two sides of the same coin. He had decided to use these as touchstone for judging the schemes of governance of all religions. Now while it is true that Dr. Ambedkar had interesting insights in religion, it must also be acknowledged that his ideas were

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<sup>104</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 22

<sup>105</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 22.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Lambek. *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. Carlton (Australia): Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 11.

influenced by western thinkers especially John Dewey and Emile Durkheim.<sup>107</sup> They defined religion in social terms, describing what religion does in society, rather than what religion substantially is.<sup>108</sup> This to an extent explains Dr. Ambedkar's oversights in responding to religions. By reducing religion to a function of society, he failed to take into account the comprehensiveness of religion. Having said this we must recognize his basic insight about religion and society. In a line it is this: to construct a just society we must have a good religion.

Besides the intense global politics of the twentieth century many in India took interest in a pamphlet "*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*" released in 1923 by Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar (1883-1966), an extreme right wing Hindu philosopher. Later his followers also took inspiration from Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925-26, which advocated social exclusion. Under these circumstances where exclusion and hostility were ideologically appealing to many people, it was extremely important for Dr. Ambedkar to support non-violence, secular and democratic ideals. For him, if political disaster was to be averted then India needed to remake herself into a new society which would be correctly designed for democracy. The design was egalitarianism. At the same time she needed to be guarded from extreme ideas of nationalist reconstruction especially if it espoused inequality of caste system as a cultural heritage and encouraged exclusion of Muslims and Christians as espousers of foreign religions.

Ideally if a new society were to be a just society then from its inception it would not have the baggage of old religious traditions to carry. Towards this end Dr. Ambedkar thought of starting a new religion. This plan was radical. In his line of reasoning only a good religion could establish a just society which required equal treatment of all people.<sup>109</sup> He underscored that all human beings by virtue of being created equal<sup>110</sup> were to be treated equally too. Therefore, natural inequality was not an excuse to reinforce social inequality.<sup>111</sup> Secondly, he elaborated on liberty. Its comprehensiveness is evident from his double pronged analysis. One prong was civil and the other was political in nature.<sup>112</sup> Civil liberty primarily involved freedom of movement except when under legal procedures,<sup>113</sup> similarly freedom of speech

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<sup>107</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Rock on which It is Built' (1937) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai, 1989, p. 181.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Crawford. *What is Religion?* London: Routledge, 2002, p. 4. Crawford's explanation of the difference between the Functional definition and Substantive definition is helpful. He writes, 'if we say that religion unites or separates people or comforts those who suffer and so on, then we are thinking of it in a functional way. Functionalism is a theoretical perspective in sociology but function refers more to the role of an institution in society. A substantial definition seeks to high light key features of a religion such as belief in God. Durkheim appears to supply both a functional and substantive definition but his beliefs do not include what those who want a substantive definition consider crucial, the supernatural dimension.'

<sup>109</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941) p.24

<sup>110</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai, 1987, p. 97.

<sup>111</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p 36.

<sup>112</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 98.

<sup>113</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 98.

involved freedom of 'thought, reading, writing and discussion, and finally freedom of action'.<sup>114</sup> Political liberty involved 'the right of individual to share in the framing of laws, making and unmaking of governments'.<sup>115</sup> He articulated a rationale for it: 'Political liberty is really a deduction from the principle of human personality and equality'.<sup>116</sup> Thirdly his understanding of fraternity required the ending of fratricidal tendencies by reinforcing kinship. He pointed out that cultural practices which restricted inter-marrying, inter-dining and inter-mingling were not in the spirit of fraternity.<sup>117</sup> What emerges is a basic non-negotiable standard of egalitarianism. Society had to be reordered or reconstructed on the basis of equality.

### **3. Dilemma with Alternatives**

We have seen that religion did not provide an escape for Dr. Ambedkar from the conflicting interests of group versus society on the one hand and on the other between individual interest and collective advantage. Rather a range of conflicting responses to this problem was offered by religion. If egalitarianism, freedom and kinship were the key to constitute good social life, then people needed to be convinced of the relativity of religion's authority. In this section we will take cognizance of the solutions that Dr. Ambedkar had offered to overcome this impasse. One alternative was to reorder existing society and the other was to construct a new society. The dilemma was that despite the progressive nature of the ideas that Dr. Ambedkar offered for the betterment of society, people resisted these proposals.

#### **3.1 Resistance to Reorder Society**

It is important to bear in mind that Dr. Ambedkar not only believed in reordering the existing society but he practically undertook this project. The Hindu Code Bill that he had revised is a case in point. Its main features was to give an equal share of property to widows and daughters with the sons, maintenance of wife if she choose to live separately for certain reasons like loathsome disease or cruelty, mandatory monogamy, adoption of children of different castes and abolition of rules of caste and sub-castes in solemnizing marriages. This bill also covered Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists besides all Hindu castes and sects in its ambit.<sup>118</sup>

A distinctive feature of this example was Dr. Ambedkar's conviction behind the Hindu Code Bill. He was convinced that religion played a key role in reordering society. Therefore, reordering of society would start with reforming its religion. Admittedly the prevailing religion needed to be reformed on the lines of his

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<sup>114</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 98.

<sup>115</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 99.

<sup>117</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 103.

<sup>118</sup> Ramachandra Guha. *India after Gandhi: the History of the World's Largest Democracy*. New Delhi: Picador (an imprint of MacMillan Ltd.) 2008, pp. 228-229.

findings, namely, to be adequately reasonable to protect life, society and individual. When a religion itself was reformed on these rational lines then the ideal scheme for society's governance would be just and useful for the people. In other words *the ideal scheme for divine governance* would be egalitarian. In his line of reasoning, once the religion was reformed the reordering of society would be easier. Except this, sacred design of social order, in his view was basic to religion all the rest which was esoteric or metaphysical was superfluous. It must also be noted that in Dr. Ambedkar's view the failure to carry out reform of religion at the appropriate time would make it irrelevant to the extent that its adherence will drop and it could vanish altogether. He wrote,

Religion is bound to lose its respect and therefore becomes the subject of ridicule and thereby loses its force as a governing principle of life, but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse, if it is not in accord with science. In other words, religion if it is to concern must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science.<sup>119</sup>

We have seen from our above discussions that religions offer various ways for governing the community of its adherents and the larger society. In the first two stages of the evolution of religion and society, the chief governing intention was the preservation of society. With the knowledge of religion that Dr. Ambedkar had, he noticed that some religions in antiquity endorsed hierarchical governance while others offered egalitarianism. Obviously there was a collision of interest between those who to their advantage promoted one at the expense of the other. What needs probing is this: which of these two did Dr. Ambedkar decide to advocate? According to him the religion that offered a scheme of governance that promoted good life was to be advocated. Good life for him was social equality. In one place he wrote,

Religion no doubt started its career by asking many questions: what am I? Who made this universe? If God made it what is the relation of Ego to God? What is the right way to propitiate God? What is the relation between I and Non-I i.e. between man and universe? What constitutes good life or that will please God? Etc. Most of these questions have been taken over by theology, metaphysics, philosophy and ethics, into which religion has become split. But there is one question that remains with religion to preach and propagate namely what constitutes good life. A religion which does not do so is not religion at all.<sup>120</sup>

In his view three things were basic for constituting good life. These were freedom, equality and kinship. The possibility to establish such a society was possible with the help of religion if it was open to appropriately use reason for reforming and

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<sup>119</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha and Future of His Religion' (1950) *Idem Writing and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-2. Mumbai, 2003, p. 104.

<sup>120</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956) *Idem Writing and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai, 1987, p. 182.

reinterpreting its traditions, scriptures and practices. Dr. Ambedkar never accepted poverty as a religious virtue because poverty reinforced social inequality.<sup>121</sup>

It must be admitted that Dr. Ambedkar's idealistic vision was too theoretical and unrealistic. He overlooked the fact that society does not readily accept change even if it was for progressive reasons especially in the domain of religion. This was obvious in the debates surrounding the Hindu Code Bill which failed in the Parliament on September 24, 1951 and led him to resign from the Cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru, then the Prime Minister of India. The opposition to this bill in 1948 had come from no less a person than Rajendra Prasad who was a candidate for the office of the President of India.<sup>122</sup> Keer describes that although Dr. Ambedkar was very unwell he went out not as a sick man but a very disappointed man.<sup>123</sup> But this may be a hagiographical sentiment. There were other reasons for Dr. Ambedkar to resign as well.<sup>124</sup> Ultimately this Bill was passed with Nehru's strategy. This was done not in full length in one go but in several small pieces.<sup>125</sup> The point I want to make in this example of the Hindu Code Bill is that people, even the enlightened ones, resist change in religion even through the arm of the law. If, therefore, an established religion failed to reorder society, was there any other option? The alternative was to reconstruct a new society to replace the old one altogether.

### 3.2 Disinterest to Reconstruct Society

For Dr. Ambedkar religion, like language, performed a social function.<sup>126</sup> One way it does this is by providing space for participation in rituals. Thus the order of rituals sets model for a social order too. The practical example is the ritual of eating and drinking together in a sacrificial meal which mingles the domain of social with the sacred. Dr. Ambedkar viewed ritual as foundational for affirming and reinforcing the social aspect of human life. Its symbols and rituals communicate to all people transcending the limits of language. For this reason it was important that a good religious tradition would have rituals to reinforce righteousness among people. A religion for the modern age should have the right kind of teaching which would promote justice, compassion and friendship. Moreover it should be rational.

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<sup>121</sup> Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged those affluent as exceptional who voluntarily accepted poverty as a blessed state of renunciation. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddha and Future of His Religion' (1950), p. 104.

<sup>122</sup> Guha, *India after Gandhi*, p. 230.

<sup>123</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 436.

<sup>124</sup> Guha has listed out the reasons that Dr. Ambedkar had mentioned in his letter of resignation of October 1951 to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Besides Nehru's lack of full support to the Hindu Code Bill there were other reasons why Dr. Ambedkar explained that he could not continue in Union Cabinet. These were his poor health, Prime Ministers failure to repose confidence in him by excluding him for discussion on planning and development, reservation about government's foreign policy especially in connection with Kashmir and the unabated tyranny on the Scheduled Castes even after independence of the country. Cf. Guha, *India after Gandhi*, p. 235.

<sup>125</sup> Guha, *India after Gandhi*, p. 240.

<sup>126</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p 23

Therefore, the way to achieve the reconstruction of society was to start a new religion.

It must be admitted that Dr. Ambedkar gave a practical shape to this as well. He did start a new religion basing it on the tradition of an older religion which he found was a good religion. What this religion was is too early to declare at this point of our discussion. Although Dr. Ambedkar did not explicitly acknowledge it, this initiative of starting a new religion was not altogether novel in India. The Mughal Emperor Jalalud-Din-Muhammad Akbar in 1582 C.E. had made a similar attempt by starting *Din-i-llahi* or The Divine Faith. It was an ethical religion of a syncretistic nature based on older Indian religions i.e. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism and Zoroastrianism.<sup>127</sup> But we also must realize that Akbar and Dr. Ambedkar with regard to religion had proceeded on entirely different lines. This was inevitable for two reasons. Firstly they lived in altogether different eras separated by three centuries. Secondly, unlike Akbar whose concern was to keep his empire integrated, Dr. Ambedkar's interest was to emancipate Dalits from the caste system. The fact, however, is that where Akbar failed, Dr. Ambedkar succeeded albeit in a limited way. The limit on the success of this new religion was placed by the fact that Dalits were not attracted to embrace it. So instead of becoming a force for social revolution it was reduced merely as a sect among numerous religious factions in India.

The point in the preceding discussion is to highlight the dilemma that on the one hand there is a desperate need for reforming religion and on the other people's resistance to initiatives in that direction is obvious. This resistance is due to their failure to see that the basis of a just society is a good religion. But we should not quickly withdraw at this point. Why? Because embedded in Dr. Ambedkar's reflections are pointers and possibilities for transcending these dilemmas to which we shall now turn our attention.

#### **4. Transcending the Dilemmas: Ambedkar's Four Basic Principles**

Strewn across Dr. Ambedkar's writings like a jigsaw puzzle are his insights to study religion. He developed his method to analyze religion to see what its governing principle was and then to assess its worth. This has a wider relevance if we apply it in our days also. So we face another question, Is Dr. Ambedkar's method of analysis and assessment of religion still valid? We may not be able to answer this question at his stage. We will proceed in hope that at the end of this study we may be able to answer it.

In this section below we will piece Dr. Ambedkar's solutions to the hurdles into a coherent pattern. We can discuss four ways to do this from his writings: the first is to focus on the purpose of religion; second is to comprehend his method to test a

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<sup>127</sup> *The Cambridge History of India*. Vol-IV. Sir Richard Burn (Ed.). Cambridge: University Press, 1937, p. 129.



religion, third, to admit the norms which could help us to reform a religion and fourth, to accept the religion-of-principles. As we study religion we can use these four ways to transcend the dilemmas which not only Dr. Ambedkar had faced but we too encounter. Each point will be discussed in a subsection.

#### 4.1 By Focusing on the Purpose of Religion

When Dr. Ambedkar started his political carrier, India was colonized by the British, fragmented by communalism and stratified by caste system and untouchability. Such social conditions were unfavourable to enhance good life for people. Out of these three conditions the social problem of caste system and communalism were explicitly religious in nature. His view was that the most serious of these was the caste system which had made social inequality and untouchability widespread. He had a reason to say so but this will be our study in the next chapters. Keeping in view the unequal fragmented condition of Indian society we need to grasp Dr. Ambedkar's insight on the purpose of religion. He underscored that its purpose was to provide a blueprint for a cohesive social order. He described this blueprint as an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. He wrote,

I take religion to mean the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance, the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral order.<sup>128</sup>

Clearly religion sanctioned and sanctified the social order as moral. Scholars like Larbeer would agree that to regard this as a definition of religion would be within the ambit of Dr. Ambedkar's perspective.<sup>129</sup> That he was consistent in this view is clear from his speech to the Mahars at Mumbai in 1936 where he had described religion as 'that which governs people'. Though in this instance he had attributed this definition to Mr. Tilak—'the foremost leader of Sanatani Hindus'<sup>130</sup> as he had described him, but this understanding in fact was taken from Robertson Smith's Burnett Lectures 1888.<sup>131</sup> This is what Smith said in his lecture-1, 'If we were called upon to examine the political institutions of antiquity, we should find it convenient to carry with us some general notion of the several types of government under which the multifarious institutions of ancient states arrange themselves. And in like manner it will be useful for us, when we examine the religious institutions of the Semites to have first some general knowledge of the types of *divine governance*, the various *ruling conceptions* of the relations of the gods to man, which underlie the rites

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<sup>128</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p.6.

<sup>129</sup> Mohan P. Larbeer. *Ambedkar on Religion: A Liberative Perspective*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, p. 160.

<sup>130</sup> 'What Way Emancipation?' (1936) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-III. Mumbai, 2003, p. 121.

<sup>131</sup> Roberson W Smith. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. First Series. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907, p. 22.

and ordinances of religion in different places and at different times'. (emphasis added).

We must also note Dr. Ambedkar's view on God. Writing in 1936 he pointed out that the idea of a personal God was most unsuitable. In this matter he opposed those who assumed religion to be a purely personal matter between a person and God. In his view the supernatural aura of God made devotees disinterested in world which only encouraged stagnating society by inequality.<sup>132</sup> Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that religion could exist without the idea of God, but it could not survive in the absence of society. Therefore, he concluded that it was not necessary to associate God with religion. The value of God was worth nothing other than conceptual. He brought this out as he explained the distinction of religion and science.<sup>133</sup> According to him,

It is necessary to consider whether a particular theory is a principle of science or the teaching of religion. That God is all-pervading is a principle of science and not of religion, because religion has a direct relation with the behaviour of man. The principle of God being omnipresent is not teaching of religion, but a principle of science.<sup>134</sup>

Strangely he removed God from the sphere of religion and located him in the empirical domain of science. It is accepted that science is morally neutral. It only explains the chain of cause and effect on the basis of empirical data. Now one way to explain the cause of inevitable and inescapable effects is God who is the ultimate cause and the unseen force of all motion's source.<sup>135</sup> Somewhat like the deists, this perspective reduces God into a neutral being out of which objects and ideas emerge. For Ambedkar, God was something like a "molecule", an object or like "democracy" or "socialism", an idea that could be studied to be proven for good, but not essential for religion.<sup>136</sup> Now if we were to accept this then reflection on God could be dropped at once, but by doing this we would only make religion deficient of its richness.

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<sup>132</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 406.

<sup>133</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Way Emancipation?' (1936) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-III. Mumbai, 2003, p. 125.

<sup>134</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Way Emancipation?' (1936), p. 126.

<sup>135</sup> In the Christian monastic tradition the Office Hymn at None obviously influenced by certain idea of God reads:

O God, creation's secret force,  
yourself unmoved, all motion's source.  
who from the morn till evening's ray,  
through all the changes guide the day.

(St. Ambrose of Milan of 4<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. Tr. J.M. Neale Cf. *The Lesser Hours*. Delhi: Brotherhood Office Book).

<sup>136</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai, 1987, p. 443.

In another article *The Rock on which it is Built*, which he wrote also around this time i.e. 1937, he was confronted with the problem to explain religion's source of authority in the absence of God. To sort this out he underscored the dual nature of religion i.e. social and sacral. Using these two terms he explained how authority manifested itself in religion. It did so in two ways: firstly *on* an individual and secondly *by* an individual on him/herself. So a person for the sake of social cohesion was required to believe and behave by the authority of religion in a particular fashion. The society of adherents enforced the rules of conformity on individuals. By this Dr. Ambedkar showed that the source of authority was social. He wrote,

Religious beliefs are enforced on the individual by the group in the same manner and for the same reason which leads it to enforce its other non-religious and purely social beliefs. The object is to maintain the integrity of the group.<sup>137</sup>

Besides the group's pressure on people to conform, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that individuals voluntarily submit to conform to religious precepts. In this case the source of authority for religion is the individual him/herself. Dr. Ambedkar referred to this kind of authority as "sacral".

The sacral source of the authority behind religious sanction comes primarily from the individual...It prepares the individual to uphold the religious beliefs. It dispenses with the necessity of the group using its social group.<sup>138</sup>

Here Dr. Ambedkar follows Emile Durkheim, the famous sociologist, by accepting a two sphere world of religion i.e. sacred and profane.<sup>139</sup> Once the idea of sacred gets associated with a belief, it inspires in people feelings of reverence, deference and a sentiment that cannot be violated. Such feelings are not associated with the sphere of the profane. In this way 'a belief becomes consecrated as a sacred thing' writes Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>140</sup> Plainly, Dr. Ambedkar located transcendence and God in the 'sacred'. Religion derived authority from its sacred aspect to regulate people's behaviour, which was basic for constituting the society. Therefore, the purpose of religion to regulate human behaviour was for enforcing social cohesion not personal piety.

We know that theology also describes the purpose of religion. Like Max Müller (1823-1900)<sup>141</sup> Dr. Ambedkar also categorized two strands of theology namely Natural and Revealed to derive three points:<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Rock on which It is Built' (1937) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai, 1989, p. 180.

<sup>138</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Rock on which It is Built' (1937), p. 180.

<sup>139</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Rock on which It is Built' (1937), p. 180.

<sup>140</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Rock on which It is Built' (1937), p. 181.

<sup>141</sup> Friedrich Maximilian Muller, a German scholar in Oriental studies, came to be known as Max Muller. He moved to Oxford where he flourished as a philologist and Indologist. He translated the Sanskrit scriptures into

1. The existence of God.
2. God's providential government of the universe.
3. God's moral government for the humankind.

Although the existence of God is affirmed in the above premise, the purpose of theology was not primarily the divine vision. Now if the vision of God was not the aim of religion, then what else was its purpose?

According to Dr. Ambedkar the two basic functions of religion that theology brings out were: governance and morality. In the absence of these two it was not possible to hold society in a cohesive order. Religions moved people to voluntarily submit to its moral injunctions and governance. It did this by sanctifying norms for a society and by propounding a sacred design for social order. This obviously was a reductionist view of religion. Nonetheless, on the basis of this he proceeded to reflect on various religious traditions. Now in the field of religious traditions there were two more problems before him. The first problem was the plurality of religions. Every religious tradition offered its own scheme of governance and its own moral tenets, which were often dissimilar and even contradictory. But here he was helpless. The second problem was this, how to assess whether these schemes were good in helping society to take right turns in the crisis of social change. He thought he could answer this problem by assessing each religious tradition on a standard norm. To establish this standard the essential features of religion had to be extracted. He pointed out that this could be done by studying the long history of society's evolution. In this evolution of society, religion also progressed. With every progressive step of society, religion experienced revolutionary changes in norms too.

Dr. Ambedkar made the welfare of human beings his centre of concern. Religious traditions instead of purporting philosophy and theology were to concentrate on ensuring contentment and dignity to human beings which comes with social equality. By focusing on this one could cross over the hurdles of dilemmas. With a clear intention to see what sort of an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* a religion had to offer, he steered away from contradiction arising out of the conflict of interest between collective benefit and an individual's right. A good blueprint for social life would include these two extreme poles within its field—the collective benefit and individual's interest. Having thus determined a religion's sacred design for social order the rest in it pertaining to esoteric and exotic could be abandoned as pointless distractions. This would make a religion rational.

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German and its English edition 'Sacred Books of the East' was published in 50 volumes. Along with this he pioneered the discipline of Comparative Religion.

<sup>142</sup> F. Max Muller. *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. London: Longmans. Green, and Co., 1873, p.124.

In view of the fact that different religions offered different *ideal-schemes-of-divine-governance*, the problem was to choose the right scheme.<sup>143</sup> This could be accomplished only by assessing each scheme on shared norms. These were *justice* and *utility* which he regarded as basic to the welfare of all people. In the section below we will see how Dr. Ambedkar using these norms developed this method for assessing a religion.

#### 4.2 By Developing a Method to Assess Religion

The way to decide whether an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of a religion was just or not was by analysing its rituals. If we reduce his exercise into four points we can get a clearer picture of his method. In his analysis of rituals he goes from specific to general. These steps were as below,

- i. Scrutinize the details of public rituals to identify the chief concern of each particular ritual.
- ii. Explore why and what the ritual actually intended to do?
- iii. Infer the chief concern of each ritual by eliminating the inconsequential from rituals.
- iv. Cull out the basic norm from the chief concern.

In this method Dr. Ambedkar identified four things. Firstly he identified the indispensability of rituals in society. Pfleiderer in the nineteenth century wrote, '[T]he kernel of profound and living religious truth is concealed under the symbolic husk of dogmatic ideas'.<sup>144</sup> On the contrary for Dr. Ambedkar it was ritual, not dogmatic ideas, which had preserved this kernel. This was so because rituals specifically manifested the social nature of religion and so its scrutiny was vital for understanding a religion. Secondly, he discovered that the chief concern of a religion was embedded in its rituals. The rituals in each stage of society's evolution were specific. In the primal society it was magic, in the antique society it was sacrifice and in the modern society it was prayer. We had earlier discussed that the aim of these rituals were to conserve life, to preserve society and to protect individuals respectively. Thirdly, from these chief concerns he drew out two general norms of religion, namely, *utility* and *justice* as the key to assess contemporary religions. Fourthly religions in all its stages had offered *schemes-of-divine-governance*. These schemes could be hierarchical or egalitarian. Now the question that needed an answer was this: which of these two schemes was right? This was a moral question. It is very interesting to note what he did. He used justice as an anvil to test.

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<sup>143</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 22.

<sup>144</sup> Otto Pfleiderer. 'Religion and Science' in *The Philosophy of Religion*. Edinburgh: William and Norgate, 1880, p. 283.

Granted that *justice* was the litmus to test the sacred design for social order propounded by a religion, yet what exactly did he mean by *justice*? It meant two things for him. Firstly, justice meant that unequal people could not be treated equally under the law. If those who in the pursuit of life had become disadvantaged e.g. Dalits, they needed to be compensated. The aim of this compensation was firstly, to bring the disadvantaged on par with others to compete in the race and secondly, to make people free to intermingle by dining and marrying in complete disregard to the barriers imposed by the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar wrote,

Justice has always evoked ideas of equality, of proportion of “compensation”. Equity signifies equality. Rules and regulations, right and righteousness are concerned with equality in value. If all men (*sic!* people) are equal, (then) all men are of the same essence, and the common essence entitled them to the same fundamental rights and to equal liberty. In short justice is simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity. It is in this sense I shall be using justice as a criterion to judge.<sup>145</sup>

The administration of justice where those who were disadvantaged were met with proportionate compensation ensured that the individuals were protected. At this point we can close the circle of argument by pointing out that what was good for individuals was good for society too. In this way the dilemma of justice versus utility is transcended.

#### **4.3 By Determining Moral Norms to Test Religion**

The clarity of Dr. Ambedkar’s stand is obvious in the way he argued his case. He evaded all those subjects that would lead to excessive philosophical speculation. For instance, he did not tie his arguments to the pole of truth. He instead preferred to determine religion’s norm of modern society on the basis of justice, where the protection of the individual was the chief concern. This was so crucial for him that he admitted the sacredness of human personality. In a way he was within the traditional Indian frame where the *atman* of human personality has been treated as sacred as the *brahman*, the ultimate truth and reality, because both in substance were undifferentiated. At the same time he was in line with the Judaeo-Christian tradition which held that God had created human beings in his own image giving them his breath of life *nephesh*. It was the sacred aspect of human personality which made it necessary to establish equality, liberty and fraternity in society. Now for Dr. Ambedkar *justice* was another name for these three. It was each individual’s right to enjoy these. He wrote,

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<sup>145</sup> B. R. Ambedkar. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ (1941), p. 25.

Once the sacredness of human personality is admitted the necessity of liberty, equality and fraternity must also be admitted as the proper climate for the development of personality.<sup>146</sup>

In Dr. Ambedkar's line of reasoning if laws of a religious tradition contradicted this normative principle, they had to be changed. In his view there was nothing eternally fixed in a religious tradition.<sup>147</sup> Actually this implied that whatever was beneficial for an individual was beneficial for the society also.

Looking back from here there is one more thing that we should underline. Normally, for Indian thinkers especially when it comes to religion, reflection on "truth" has a significant place. Its spiritual significance is obvious in the way *sat* or the true being, is expressed. It is regarded as the "real" in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, *asato ma sadgamaya* i.e. Lead me from the unreal (*asat*) to the real (*sat*).<sup>148</sup> Here the prayer is to be led to *sat* i.e. the truth that really exists! Let us take the example of Mahatma Gandhi, who was openly Hindu. He considered truth to be God.<sup>149</sup> In his famous autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, he wrote, "My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth".<sup>150</sup> Even his political method he called *satyagraha* or "the firmness of truth".<sup>151</sup> The term became famous as the truth-force. For Dr. Ambedkar "truth" was neither the start nor the end of his life and work. The basis of his intellectual reflection and political action was "justice". This is evident in the Preamble of the Constitution of India which he drew up and clearly reflects his way of thinking:

We, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, have solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign (Socialist Secular) Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual (and the unity and integrity of the Nation);

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<sup>146</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 99.

<sup>147</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 79.

<sup>148</sup> 'Brhadaranyaka Upanishad' – I.iii.28, also see Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. London: Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 80.

<sup>149</sup> Hendrik M. Vroom. *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, p. 136.

<sup>150</sup> M.K. Gandhi. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmadabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1948, p. 615.

<sup>151</sup> Gandhi. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. p. 389.

In our Constituent Assembly this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution.<sup>152</sup>

Clearly, the absence of the word “truth” here shows that Dr. Ambedkar did not perceive any conflict between justice and truth, provided that truth served the purpose of justice. It is in this sense that he had cited the Buddha “Know Truth as Truth and Untruth as Untruth”.<sup>153</sup> Following his line of thinking we can further say that the insufficiency of truth causes as much injustice as does its exaggeration.

Therefore, an unwavering focus on *justice* can help to rise above the dilemmas that the conflict of norms produces. In this line Dr. Ambedkar’s norms of *justice* and *utility* could still be applied to religious traditions.

#### 4.4 By Accepting the Religion of Principles

Before proceeding further we need to assess our findings. The first is that the conflict of norms create dilemma. Secondly, religious traditions are also a basis of social inequality. Thirdly it is difficult to reorder or reconstruct society through the agency of religion alone. However, the story does not end here. We have found that embedded in Dr. Ambedkar’s writings are indications that can help us to resolve the dilemma. We will note that he differentiated religious traditions into two regimes: *religion of rules* and the *religion of principles*. He held that under rules, people acted without thinking whereas with principle as their guide people had to think about why and how they were to act. Therefore, such actions had to be responsible acts. Interestingly this difference may well be pointed out in the Bible too. The legalistic observance of the Sabbath as obedience to God’s command to Moses is the *religion of rules*, whereas Jesus’ disregard for rule by restoring the withered hand of a man on a Sabbath day points to the *religion of principles*.<sup>154</sup> The principle is that God’s ultimate concern was not cessation of work on the Sabbath but the happiness and wholeness of human beings by giving rest to all creatures.

Doing what is said to be good by virtue of a rule and doing good in the light of a principle are two different things. The principle may be wrong but the act is conscious and responsible. The rule may be right but the act is mechanical. A religious act may not be a correct act but must at least be a responsible act. To permit this responsibility, Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility which is the essence of a truly religious act.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Constitution of India*. Ministry of Culture, Youth Affairs and Sports. New Delhi: Surya Print Process Pvt. Ltd. 2000. <indiacode.nic.in> visited on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012. Also note the words in brackets were later amendments.

<sup>153</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Annihilation of Caste’ (1936), p. 23.

<sup>154</sup> Exodus Chapter 20; the gospel of Mark Chapter 3.

<sup>155</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Annihilation of Caste’ (1936), p. 75.



Let me explain this quotation with this lively example. In the Indian folklore there are many interesting stories of demons that live on trees. We can regard the two regimes i.e. the *religion of rules* and the *religion of principles* like two demons that lived on a tree. They would descend each night to quarrel with each other till the break of the day. Then they would ascend the tree and sleep the whole day long. Again at night they would descend from the tree to resume their fight. Similarly the *religion of rules* and the *religion of principles* live on the same tree. The tree is our society and the two regimes of religions may either quarrel or may live with indifference to each other. However, both have survived long enough and have become religions of our modern society.<sup>156</sup> Dr. Ambedkar took his stand along with the *religion of principles* and did his best to exorcise the demon of the *religion of rules*. He held that the *religion of rules* in the Indian context was the *dharma*. What the *religion of principles* was will become plain only at the end of this study. The fact is that by 1950 Dr. Ambedkar, having reached his conclusions in a decisive way did not return to these terminologies. I suggest that the struggle between the two regimes still continues which makes Dr. Ambedkar's response to religion a lively and a relevant study today. However, is it possible to exorcise the tree i.e. society, from regime of the *religion of rules*? This is an issue that we need to remember as we study Dr. Ambedkar's response to religion in this study. If one were to follow the regime of the *principles*, then the inner contradictions of norms can be overcome. This is so because a *principle's* focus is the ultimate vision, whereas *rule* like a precept can become an end in itself.

At this point of discussion we need to ask once more, besides religion what else does Dr. Ambedkar offer to forge a just society? The answer is that he offers democracy. Unquestionably for Dr. Ambedkar justice was social, which could be best assured in a democracy. Besides the relationship of equality with religion, Dr. Ambedkar also saw a connection of equality with democracy. Now while the possibility for establishing equality may also be asserted by other political procedures, for Dr. Ambedkar democracy was best suited to facilitate it. The reason why Dr. Ambedkar emphasized democracy<sup>157</sup> was because it valued all people equally by virtue of one-person one-vote. Such equality of democracy was essential

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<sup>156</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 75.

<sup>157</sup> Dr. Ambedkar identified two essential features of a democratic society. *Firstly*, the absence of stratification of society into classes, and *secondly*, the social habit of people to re-adjust in reciprocation of interest. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that mere election to constitute a government was no democracy, rather 'A government for the people can be had only where the attitude of each individual is democratic which means that each individual is prepared to treat every other individual as his equal and is prepared to give him the same liberty which he claims for himself. The democratic attitude of mind is the result of socialization of the individual in a democratic society. Democratic society is therefore a prerequisite of a democratic government.' Dr. Ambedkar points out that without this attitude of mind the foundations of democracy would be laid on shifting sands. In his discussion on the democratic values of equality, liberty and fraternity, he contended that the central concern of these three values was not the French Revolutionists but religion. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Brahma Is Not Dharma' (1956) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 281.

for all people to enjoy freedom. At the same time democracy was rooted in good religion.

What sustains democracy? Some would say that it is the law of the State which sustains equality and liberty. This is not a true answer. What sustains equality and liberty is fellow-feeling. What the French Revolutionists called fraternity ... without fraternity liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty it is because at the basis of both these is fraternity. Fraternity is therefore the root of democracy. ... Wherein lie the roots of fraternity without which democracy is not possible? Beyond dispute, it has its origin in religion.<sup>158</sup>

Looking back on what we have highlighted in the discussion so far, reordering a society on Dr. Ambedkar's terms implies strengthening a democratic way of life and developing a scientific outlook on life. In other words, it means the enjoyment of freedom, equality and rationality by all people. This is what lies behind *utility*, *justice* and *reason*. On these norms, the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* propounded by each religious tradition needed to be tested.

We can now concisely present Dr. Ambedkar's line of thinking in ten points below:

1. The meaning of religion was propounding an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* for society. We may alternatively call it as the sacred design for social order.
2. The purpose of religion was to consecrate norms and sanctify a social order as moral and in this way to establish cohesive society.
3. The function of religion was to universalize and spiritualize social values and to be an agency of social control. It was to preach and propagate what was good for life.
4. Three central concerns of religion were social i.e. conservation of life, preservation of society and protection of the individual.
5. This could be reduced into two words i.e. *utility* and *justice*.
6. Justice was another word for equality, liberty and fraternity.
7. Justice included compensatory discrimination for the disadvantaged people of society.
8. A just religion should be both moral and rational.
9. The evolution of religion involved revolutionary changes over a long period of time. These we have called the *ten-shifts hypothesis*.
10. There were two types of religions, namely, the *religion-of-rules* and the *religion-of-principles*. The former was mechanical but the latter was intellectual and moral.

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<sup>158</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Brahma Is Not Dharma' (1956), p. 284.

From these ten basic insights which are fundamental to Dr Ambedkar's theory of religion, I have further highlighted four critical elements: 1. the meaning of religion as *the sacred design for social order*; 2. the central concern of religion as *utility* and *justice*; 3. evolution of religion as *the ten-shifts hypothesis*; and 4. the conflict between two types of religion i.e. the *religion-of-rules* versus the *religion-of-principles*. Clearly with this reductionist view Dr. Ambedkar worked out his theory and assessments of Indian religions which we will study in the subsequent chapters. I, therefore, propose to call it *Dr. Ambedkar's Reductionist Apparatus* which became the anvil for his analysis and assessment of the Indian religious traditions. In the above scheme a good religion was concerned both with society and with individuals. Therefore, the norms of *utility* and *justice* respectively constituted its morality<sup>159</sup> which in turn constituted a good religion and a good society for people.<sup>160</sup> Dr. Ambedkar regarded this approach to religion as rational and moral<sup>161</sup> and, therefore, suitable to analyze and assess the governing schemes propounded by different religious traditions.

However, one should cautiously appreciate his assessing methods, which commends some religious traditions and disregards others. But this was precisely what Dr. Ambedkar was intending to do when he wrote,

While it is true that comparative religion has abrogated the capricious distinction between true and false religions based on purely arbitrary and a priori considerations, it has brought in its wake some false notions about religion. The most harmful one is the one I have mentioned namely that all religions are equally good and that there is no necessity of discriminating between them. Nothing can be a greater error than this. Religion is an institution or an influence and like all social influences and institutions, it may help or it may harm a society which is in its grip.<sup>162</sup>

For Dr. Ambedkar the claim of a religion to be exclusively true and disregard others as false was inconsequential; instead a religious tradition for him was either good or bad. This had to be assessed on the anvil of *utility* and *justice*.

Having reached this point he was confronted with another predicament. This was the dilemma of democracy where freedom could come into conflict with security. The consequence of freedom would be social inequality if the disadvantaged and the vulnerable were adversely affected. A situation like this diametrically contradicted the ideals of democracy. To understand Dr. Ambedkar's solution to this dilemma let us put the question like this: in democracy where the

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<sup>159</sup> Dr. Ambedkar did not regard equality, fraternity and liberty mooring in the French revolution; rather he identified their roots in Christian and later Buddhist moral values.

<sup>160</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 182.

<sup>161</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha And Future of His Religion' (1950) *Idem Writing and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-2. Mumbai, 2003, p. 104.

<sup>162</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 24.

wish of the majority prevailed how the survival and security of the disadvantaged communities and the vulnerable individuals was to be assured? Now we know that Dr. Ambedkar had described democracy as a free social order. In it people decided the course of their national life by accepting what the majority wished. Nonetheless, democracy without discrimination welcomed all to compete on its turf. Suppose if all, advantaged and disadvantaged, were in a race, then in Dr. Ambedkar's view, all the competitors needed to be treated equally from the start to the end. It would be futile, rather unfair, if the competitors were treated equally midway when they did not have an equal start. He held that,

In a free social order the responsibility for survival in the struggle for existence lies on the individual. This responsibility is one of the greatest disadvantages of a free social order. Whether an individual is able to carry out this responsibility depends upon fair start, equal opportunity and square deal.<sup>163</sup>

Here Dr. Ambedkar finally made the breakthrough. He called to attention the element of fairness that was inherent in administering justice. Accordingly, the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* not only had to be just by being egalitarian but fairness in justice also needed to be acknowledged. Obviously, fair meant equality on all turns, at all levels and in all offers. For example, when Dr. Ambedkar was arguing for the increase of scholarship of Dalit children in science and technical training, he was demanding a fair start.<sup>164</sup> Later his demand for the separate electorate for Dalits and Gandhi's offer of reservation for them are examples of square deal.<sup>165</sup> These are examples of security and survival for the disadvantaged people in a democratic society which in my view is what Dr. Ambedkar meant by being fair. It was not imported into the sphere of justice; rather it was inherent in it. This was the solution for Dr. Ambedkar's dilemma with democracy. This also completes the cycle of Dr. Ambedkar's response to religions.

Now for clarity's sake let us join together the loose strands of Dr. Ambedkar's insights. These are distinctly; religion, society and law. In his view, religion needed to propound egalitarianism as the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*, society needed to be democratic and laws needed to be fair. A combined push of these three components in the desired direction would result in a quiet social revolution and the triumph of equality and liberty.

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<sup>163</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Slaves and Untouchables' (1953) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 17.

<sup>164</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Educational Grievances' (1942) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-10. Mumbai: 1991, p. 427.

<sup>165</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-9. Mumbai: 1990, p. 47.

## 5. Conclusion

WHAT COMES OUT FROM OUR DISCUSSION is that Dr. Ambedkar's response to religion was not for the sake of religion itself but in the interest of establishing a society-of-equals. Therefore, for him the questions of the origin, nature and practice of religion were not essential; instead, he studied and assessed various religions from a social perspective of justice. For Dr. Ambedkar justice was another name for equality, liberty and fraternity. We may note that Dr. Ambedkar had changed the sequence of words in the slogan. In his writings instead of "liberty" he had placed "equality" first except where he was directly referring to the French Revolution. Obviously, the need of social equality for Dalits preceded liberty.

Interestingly, as we have seen above, both Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi agreed on the significance of religion in society and both had fathomed the value of religion in politics but there was a remarkable difference in their responses. This was so because the basis of Dr. Ambedkar for responding to religion was different from Mahatma Gandhi. Let me put it like this: Mahatma Gandhi regarded truth as the anvil for testing religious ideals whereas Dr. Ambedkar regarded justice as the anvil of this purpose. With this in view, we can understand the reason why Dr. Ambedkar was not inclined to argue on the truthfulness of religion as such; instead, he wanted to assess its worth by exposing what was unjust in a religion. The validity of Dr. Ambedkar's approach lies in his skill to deploy scholarly findings for the benefit of socially disadvantaged communities. For this reason religion in his view was to be reformed or reconstructed for the benefit of Dalits. He never claimed the disappearance of religion once the objective of justice was achieved in the world and we know that the stability it establishes in society is well recognized.<sup>166</sup>

In this study we must keep in mind the basic problem which Dr. Ambedkar had addressed in his time. These were untouchability and segregation of people which was the excessive outcome of the caste system in India. This inequality was the face of social injustice perpetuated on a mass scale throughout a country whose population now explodes over a billion. In the light of our discussion above let us articulate Dr. Ambedkar's concerns in a couple of questions,

- What was the origin of inequality, segregation and untouchability in society?
- Which religion can establish an egalitarian society?

Dr. Ambedkar's life-time work was dedicated to answer these two questions. He researched and wrote, reflected and articulated theories as a philosopher, a reformer and a politician. In this learned exercise he struggled to overcome his dilemma with religion. He was constrained to deeply reflect as he negotiated the inherent conflicts

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<sup>166</sup> Varghese Manimala. *Towards Mutual Fecundation and Fulfillment of Religions: An Invitation to Transcendence and Dialogue with a Cosmotheandric Vision*. Delhi: Media House & ISPCK, 2009, p. 231.

of interests between the specifics and universal i.e. *reason, justice* and *utility* in the domain of religion. These norms constituted the *religion of principles* which we have earlier called Dr. Ambedkar's Reductionist Apparatus. Now with these norms or the 'apparatus' in place we will examine how Dr. Ambedkar analyzed and assessed different Indian religions.

## Chapter Three

### Response to Primal Religion

#### 1. Introduction

The boy Bhim became sensitive to the experiences of segregation as he grew up pursuing his career. He realized that segregation was due to the untouchability arising out of the anxiety of the clean castes to maintain their purity from the defiling effects of the untouchables. Later as a scholar in his own right he wanted to uncover the roots of this practice which led him to study the earliest form of society and its religion. What Dr. Ambedkar referred to as 'savage religion' and 'primitive tribes' in the Indian context is expressed by the term *Adivasi*.<sup>167</sup> The fundamental meaning of this term is 'the first inhabitants' which suggests a later arrival of other people in the Indian subcontinent. To counter the controversy that this implication instigated a new term *vanvasi* i.e. the forest dwellers,<sup>168</sup> was introduced by some right wing Hindu ideologues.<sup>169</sup> However, this term is still to gain acceptability both in popular imagination and among academicians. The scope of this chapter does not allow us to delve into details surrounding debates of terminological exactitudes, which apparently are productions of ideological interests. Some have suggested the term "pre-literary religion/society," but this proposal failed to gain ground among the scholars and as such remains a suggestion and opinion of a few.

On the other hand, the term Primal Religion has gained a greater acceptability than Nature Religion. Therefore, in order to use this term unhindered in the rest of this chapter, I will demonstrate the reasonableness of its recent usage. Admittedly this has been discussed at length by Frykenberg in his recent book *Christianity in India*. Attention should be drawn to the fundamental point in his argument that 'primal' is not restricted to mean the preliminary appearance of religion in the early stages of human society; rather it means the primal feeling of every individual that drives him/her to a greater transcendental power. This is what he means when he writes, 'Primal Religion posits the existence of something universally present within all humankind. ... Whether fully articulated or not, any individual or community that feels anxiety, panic or threats to survival instinctively resorts to primal religion. Primal responses, outcries of anguish, and fear, calls for help or prayers for escape may be involuntary'.<sup>170</sup> The reason why Frykenberg argues in favour of 'Primal' is due to the human instinct to evoke an elemental urgency in the face of terror,

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<sup>167</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), pp. 10 and 89.

<sup>168</sup> Jaffrelot Christophe. *Religion, Caste and Politics in India*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2010, p.391.

<sup>169</sup> Santanu K. Patro. 'Conversion, Suddhi and Adivasi Identity' in *Religion and Society* Vol.50 No.3. Bangalore: CISRS, September 2005, p. 12.

<sup>170</sup> Robert Eric Frykenberg. *Christianity in India: from Beginnings to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 10.

violence or imminent death. He shows that primordial quests for safety, contentment and well-being are primal. 'Such quests,' he writes, 'are quite essentially, and not unusually, religious'.<sup>171</sup>

Be this as it may, Dr. Ambedkar treated Primal Religions as a subject of study as the first form of religion like many scholars do and regarded it as basic to all religions. He also discussed it anthropologically, as the religion the *Adivasis* in India who are otherwise called the Scheduled Tribes in the Indian State gazettes. By what is regarded as original forms of the far past he was meaning a living religion of the millions who dwell in the Indian *jungles* or forests, which are the most deprived parts of the country.

As to the description of their clothes Dr. Ambedkar wrote, 'they economize them to a vanishing point'.<sup>172</sup> The familiarity with nakedness was to Dr. Ambedkar a story of insulated life of earliest forms of society within the confines of their territories. For the same reason he describes the scantily dressed women in very small petticoats and men in loincloth woven out from a fibre of a forest tree, as was the case with *Bonda Porajas* and *Momjak Nagas* of Assam. The fact of their socially insulated life was exposed in what their women wore: fillet of Palmyra leaf beads in enormous quantity and ornaments on neck but hardly any clothes.<sup>173</sup> He mentioned the use of feather by males to decorate their turban and excessive tattooing on females' faces and sometimes on their legs too.

In this chapter we will see how Dr. Ambedkar viewed the nature and significance of the Primal Religion. He did not assess its viability for Dalits; rather he responded from a theoretical angle in two ways. Firstly, he studied the nature of untouchability in the earliest forms of society. Secondly, he extracted basic principles i.e. the intention of the rituals in the Primal Religions, to lay foundation of his own approach to assess other religions in modern India. As we have discussed above that various terms like *upjati*, *janjati* and *vanvasi* have been used for the indigenous communities in India, but we shall restrict ourselves to use both Scheduled Tribes<sup>174</sup> alternatively *Adivasi* and their belief system as Primal Religion unless the sense in the paragraph requires other usages or else when it occurs in citations.

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<sup>171</sup> Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, p. 10.

<sup>172</sup> B. R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5, 1989, p. 130.

<sup>173</sup> B. R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p. 130.

<sup>174</sup> The Scheduled Tribes (STs) are historically disadvantaged indigenous people of India who are recognized in the Constitution of India. 744 tribes were listed in the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 in twenty-two States in its First Schedule. After Independence the government gave special attention to the STs by extending policies of reservation, scholarships and State benefits not only to compensate for the social and economic disadvantages they had historically suffered but also to help them progress in the social mainstream through education, training and participation in democracy.



## 2. Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes : savarnas and avarnas

As we have discussed above Dr. Ambedkar contended that the relevance of Primal Religion was to provide adequate succour to human beings in the face of calamities threatening to destroy order. But this was not his main concern in this field of study. His aim was to study the nature of untouchability as practiced in the Primal Religion.<sup>175</sup> To study this Dr. Ambedkar neither took the intellectual nor the emotion aspects into consideration; instead he took social aspect seriously. We know that the modern civilization carries with it a deposit of culture as it gradually evolved over the centuries. However for some reason this was not the case with every human community. Consequently in many parts of the world we still find some earliest forms of society. Dr. Ambedkar wrote,

Civilization as compromising and accumulated store of knowledge of man and nature, of arts and crafts, an ethical code regulating the conduct of man towards his fellows, as social code laying down the forms and conventions to be observed by individuals, a civil code prescribing the rights and duties of the rulers and the ruled and a religious creed relating to natural and supernatural – is a rare prize. It had not been the good fortune of all races to develop it in all its fullness. Many have stood where they were at the start. Many took one or two steps and have been at a halt. Others have only revolved round and round. The primitive races of Australia and Polynesia, when they were first discovered a few generations ago, were found to have developed articulate speech and to know how to make fire. They had not advanced beyond the middle stage of savagery.<sup>176</sup>

Although he argued that the backward condition of the people in primitive society was similar all over the world yet there was a difference between the scheduled Tribes in India and those in other parts of the world for instance in Australia, Americas and Africa. The condition of the former unlike the latter was not due to their inadvertent isolation but due to the deliberate neglect of the civilized people in their surroundings in India. He observed that ‘there must be something very radically wrong with a civilization which has failed to elevate to their manhood (*sic!* dignity) 79.5 millions of human beings’.<sup>177</sup>

What lay behind Dr. Ambedkar’s response to the Primal Religion and its culture was his intention to trace the root of untouchability in it. Dr. Ambedkar explained the impact of untouchability by juxtaposing the caste based *savarnas* with tribal-dalit *avarnas*. An exercise of comparison of the two reveals the trait of their enduring capacity to survive as independent societies. Contrastingly the earliest

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<sup>175</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Untouchables’ (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 249.

<sup>176</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Civilization or Felony’ (1938) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-5, 1989, pp. 134-135.

<sup>177</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Civilization or Felony’ (1938), p. 134.

forms of communities were trapped in an antiquated pattern of life and in prehistoric worldview.<sup>178</sup> Attention should be drawn to Dr. Ambedkar's firmness in showing that Dalits stood apart from *Adivasis*. It must be admitted that Dr. Ambedkar does this with an intent to which we will now turn our attention.

His line of argument was that although *Adivasis* and Dalits belonged to the non-caste *avarna* strand, the former were essentially distinct from the latter. He further refined his deduction by drawing a distinction between tribal *Adivasis* and Dalits on the basis of their condition and position. Both *Adivasis* and Dalits shared the same condition but in the matter of position the former stood all together on a different ground than the latter.<sup>179</sup> Attention should be drawn to a significant point that Dr. Ambedkar makes in this connection. He underscored the fact that although the *Adivasis* were outside the caste system they were not regarded as untouchables. This distinction led him to a serious religio-social conclusion. This is what he wrote about them,

That is an advantage which they have over the Untouchables and which makes them their future assured... once they come out of their forest recesses and take part in civilization, there is nothing that will stand in their way.<sup>180</sup>

The two points that should be noted from Dr. Ambedkar's discussion are these: firstly, that the Primal Religion was not the religion of Dalits, and secondly, social isolation was not imposed on the Scheduled Tribes by the dominant civilization. If we take cognisance of what Nirmal Minz, a Lutheran Adivasi Bishop in Ranchi,<sup>181</sup> observes we may reckon that Dr. Ambedkar was not wrong in his classification of tribes and castes. Nirmal points out that the contemporary attitude of the Indian State which perceives the Scheduled Tribes and their Primal Religion in a passing phase of assimilation into the mainstream of dominant culture is one of the evidences that *Adivasis* have a possibility of being absorbed into the caste system.<sup>182</sup>

### 3. Worldview of Primal Religion

Dr. Ambedkar found that the primary concern of the Primal Religions was not God. He wrote that, 'in the savage religion there is no trace of the idea of God'.<sup>183</sup> It must be admitted that this position is incompatible with the growing insights on

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<sup>178</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Problem of Isolation' (1953) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-5, 1989, p. 113.

<sup>179</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p. 143.

<sup>180</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p. 143.

<sup>181</sup> Nirmal Minz (1927- ) educated in India and Chicago is an Adivasi bishop in the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in India who through his writings particularly since 1997 has drawn attention to social issues of Scheduled Tribes especially of the Jharkhand region in India. Cf. John C. England et al (Ed.) *Asian Christian Theologies*. New York: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 274.

<sup>182</sup> Nirmal Minz. *Tribal Issues in India Today* in *Religion and Society* Vol-50. No. 3. September 2005. Bangalore: CISRS, p. 8.

<sup>183</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 12.

Primal Religion. Contemporary scholars like Gillian Mary Bediako<sup>184</sup> contend that the Primal Religion contain the idea of a Supreme Being who appears in personal and collective consciousness. Although no shrines are erected specifically for its worship, that its awareness is evident in its mention at the start of sacrifice is a case in point.<sup>185</sup> Some scholars have described the Supreme Being in the Primal Religion as an inherent impersonal power which gave thrust to an object, for instance for an arrow to pierce. The word “mana” used for this was taken from the Melanesian Island dwellers.<sup>186</sup> Dr. Ambedkar did not discuss these scholarly hypotheses for one reason that he did not believe in the idea of God constituted the core of Primal Religion. Perhaps the most interesting thing to notice in Dr. Ambedkar’s argument was his effort to find in Primal Religion a principle other than God, of universal significance. He found ‘life’ as its essential principle. He wrote,

[T]hat life and the preservation of life constitute the essence of religion even in the present day society is beyond question.<sup>187</sup>

This principle or the intention to conserve life was crucial for Dr. Ambedkar to analyse the significance of its rituals. We may recall from our discussion on this subject earlier in chapter two that this intention was also operational in the modern religion’s concern for the continuance of human race.<sup>188</sup>

It is very interesting to note that Dr. Ambedkar breaks the myth of holism and harmony of Primal Religion and society by highlighting the primeval view of this world as a defiling place. Consequently the ensuing anxiety created an eagerness of the primitive people to rid themselves of this defilement.<sup>189</sup> On this ground Dr. Ambedkar contended that Primal Religion was a ‘live system of well-defined body of rites and rituals’<sup>190</sup> to help the people out of this dilemma. He identified three causes of defilement in the primitive world:<sup>191</sup>

1. Occurrences of certain events.
2. Contact with certain things.
3. Contact with certain persons.

These three causes therefore became the basis of taboo. Anyone who would touch them became defiled and needed clearance from it. They also needed an assurance of

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<sup>184</sup> Gillian Mary Bediako specializes in Primal Religion and Christian faith in its historical, phenomenological and theological dimensions. She has been the Acting Deputy Rector of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana.

<sup>185</sup> Gillian Mary Bediako. ‘Primal Religion Thought and Practice’ in *A Guide to Religious Thought and Practice*. Santanu K. Patro (Ed.) New Delhi: ISPCK, 2011, p. 25.

<sup>186</sup> Milton G Miller and Sylvan D. Schwartzman. *Our Religion and Our Neighbors*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965, p. 17.

<sup>187</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>188</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>189</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Untouchables’ (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 249.

<sup>190</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Untouchables’ (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 249.

<sup>191</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Untouchables’ (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 250.

insulation from contamination. Taboo was the form of untouchability in the Primal Religion. This in Dr. Ambedkar's views constituted the bedrock for people to forge or to curtail relationships with others and with their environment. Let us see how Dr. Ambedkar explains the regulation in these earliest societies.

### **3.1 Ensuring Riddance of Defilement**

Dr. Ambedkar's idea of drawing up a list of events causing defilement allows us to glimpse into the world of the Scheduled Tribes. This list sets out six specific events: 1. Birth, 2. Initiation, 3. Puberty, 4. Marriage, 5. Cohabitation, and 6. Death.<sup>192</sup> Dr. Ambedkar's discussion on the Primal Religion's rituals for these events portrays people in the earliest society to be endlessly engaged in manoeuvring their life in a world that posed danger for them at every turn. His discussion suggests primitive people's view of the impossibility of being free from defilement. But if we accept Dr. Ambedkar's view can we then find a way out of this dilemma? How could the people in primitive society be assured of the removal of defilement? The importance of my query lies in the fact that untouchability in the Primal Religion was rooted in the people's notion of defilement. Dr. Ambedkar pointed to the Bathongas of South Africa where the idea of defilement was associated with travel to alien territories. A person who had travelled into alien territories was an untouchable. Therefore for the riddance of defilement ritualized sterilization was performed.

Among the Bathonga, a tribe in South Africa, it is believed that those who travel outside their own country are peculiarly open to danger from the influence of foreign spirits and in particular from demon possession. Strangers are tabu because worshipping strange gods, they bring strange influence with them. They are, therefore, fumigated or purified in some other way.<sup>193</sup>

By the ritual of fumigation, the Bathonga tribe got their affected people freed from contamination. For the same reason Dr. Ambedkar contended that ritual segregation and isolation was observed in birth, initiation, marriage, death and in dealing with the sacred and the strange.<sup>194</sup> This segregation was a form of untouchability. However, this segregation and untouchability was temporary and there were rituals to get rid of the contamination.

### **3.2 Assuring Insulation from Contamination**

Dr. Ambedkar also took cognisance of those rituals which assured protection from becoming contaminated. We glimpse into the primitive worldview through Dr. Ambedkar's eye, for instance in the customs associated with burial. Beneath the custom of burying implements and weapons along with the corpse lay the idea that

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<sup>192</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 250.

<sup>193</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-7, 1990, p. 252.

<sup>194</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 252.

the possessions of the dead were defiled. This was to ensure that no living person was trapped into danger and ill-luck by its use, thus assuring insulation from the contamination of the dead. Similarly the ritual of marriage in the *Munda* tribe of the girl to a tree before her marriage with the bridegroom was intended to neutralize impurity associated with marriage.

Of what Dr. Ambedkar understood of Primal Religion, the perception of sacred and profane constituted the worldview in its earliest forms. The anxiety attached to the detection of defilement and the seriousness for its riddance has to be understood as crucial attitudes of the people of those times. The reason behind this was a perceived threat to the order of life. The practices of *Todas* and Polynesians suggest that what was sacred had to be segregated from the ordinary. The point was that the touch of the ordinary effectively polluted the sacred.<sup>195</sup> It is easy to understand the harmful effect of the polluted on the sacred as a threat to the order of life. What, however, is difficult to explain is the harmful effect associated with the sacred itself. Through the example of the Royal symbol of the tribe's Chief in Malaya, now known as the Peninsular Malaysia, Dr. Ambedkar shows that excessive or unwanted availability of the sacred power which some tribes regarded as harmful to human beings, made that object taboo or untouchable.

The sacred quality of the chief in Malaya Peninsula also resided in the Royal Regalia and anyone touching it invited serious illness or death.<sup>196</sup>

The Primal Religion found its way of dealing with it through appropriate rituals and customs. However, the way Dr. Ambedkar used this information to suggest that social segregation without deeper analysis sounds shallow. Dr. Ambedkar left the spirit world of the primitive worldview completely untouched. The fear of ghosts, ancestors and spirits incapacitates people to live freely. The terror of magical spells dismays them and the unscientific diagnosis of witchdoctors of various illnesses bring great sufferings to the people. The worldview embedded in the Primary Religions is of a pre-scientific age and so the line of reasoning is also not rational.

#### **4. Relevance of Rituals in the Primal Religion**

Two things in particular attracted Dr. Ambedkar attention in Primal Religion. The first thing was what he called as the 'performance' of ritual and the second thing called the 'occasion' of this performance. The 'occasion' brought into force the defilements or contamination that were harmful for the well being of the people and cohesiveness of society. The 'performance' of ritual averted this harm.

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<sup>195</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 251.

<sup>196</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 251.

First is the performance of rites and ceremonies, the practice of magic or tabu and the worship of fetish or totem. The second thing that is noticeable is that the rites, ceremonies. Magic, tabu, totem and fetish are conspicuous by their connection with certain occasions.<sup>197</sup>

He underscored that the occasion of the performance rituals was the key to appreciate the relevance of Primal Religion as it revealed both their mindset and worldview. In Dr. Ambedkar's view the significance of the former was essential but the latter was only incidental

#### **4.1 The Occasion of Ritual**

For the people of the earliest society the events associated with an individual's life was of great significance. These were rituals on the occasions of birth, marriage and death which we now call as the rites of passage. Other occasions like puberty, attaining adulthood, sickness and war were equally important because these were associated with food, its cultivation and attainment of one's capacities for farming. These critical turns in the life of every individual constituted critical turns for society too. Life needed to be conserved, in other words human beings needed protection from sickness and death and the livestock needed protection from epidemic and the agriculture needed protection from famines. Admittedly in the absence of life no society would survive.

These occasions are chiefly those which represent the crises of human life. The events such as birth of the first born, attaining manhood, reaching puberty, marriage, sickness, death and war are the usual occasions which are marked out for the performance of rites and ceremonies, the use of magic and the worship of totem.<sup>198</sup>

Plainly the people in the earliest stages were squarely faced with an immitigable law of nature i.e. the survival of the fittest. They had to survive through this impartial natural law. Therefore, all that harmed life like drought, pestilence and natural disasters had to be averted. This was done by rituals of magic, taboo and totem but Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that these rituals did not constitute the heart of the Primal Religion; rather the social occasions associated with the survival of human species constituted its heart.

It is true that the savage society practices magic, believes in tabu and worships totem. But it is wrong to suppose that these constitute the religion or form the source of religion. To take such a view is to elevate what is incidental to the position of the

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<sup>197</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 10.

<sup>198</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 10.

principal. The principal thing in the Religion of the savage is the elemental facts of human existence such as life, death, birth, marriage etc.<sup>199</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar was clear that life and its conservation, not rituals, constituted the basis of Primal Religion. The concern was social because, as we have seen above, the occasions that created a crisis for survival of society and were crucial for the survival of its members called for the performance of ritual. Although performance of rituals was secondary but they too had their significance for the people of the earliest society.

#### **4.2 The Performance of Ritual**

Granted that the passages of life and the threat of nature were occasions when rituals were performed and also that these occasions were essential and not the performance for rituals, yet rituals held sway on people. From what we have discussed above, rituals were to undertake two things: one, to enhance life at the critical junctures of a person's growth, and two, to avert harm to life when struck by natural disaster. However, there was one more thing for which ritual of purification was required. It was defilement.

Along with the development of the notion of defilement, Scheduled Tribes had developed certain purificatory media and purificatory ceremonies for dispelling impurity.<sup>200</sup>

Impurity was implied for all those members of a tribe who had become ritually defiled either by breaking or by being careless about taboos. In the purification rituals Dr. Ambedkar identified the use of water and blood by way of sprinkling to purify a defiled person. Other rituals included changing of clothes, cutting hair and nails, sweat bath, fire, fumigation, burning of incense and fanning with tree branches.<sup>201</sup> We need to note that such rituals for purification were not exclusively confined to the earliest practice of religion but its vestiges have survived right down to the religions of the modern times. Interestingly Dr. Ambedkar identifies two more practices in Primal Religion to deal with untouchability. The first he classifies as rituals of 'transferring' the defilement and the second was the ritual of 'scapegoat' that takes it away.<sup>202</sup> And so a defiled person was restored to society and the threat to social cohesiveness was averted.

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<sup>199</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 10.

<sup>200</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 253.

<sup>201</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 251.

<sup>202</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 251.

## 5 Assessing Indigenous Primal Religion

Dr. Ambedkar's estimation of Primal Religion can be assessed in his description of the evolution of social history of human beings. His description was analytical in the sense that he accepted the two phase evolution of the Scheduled Tribes: the savage and the barbaric. Concerned with demonstrating the undeveloped condition of the tribal territories in India he proceeded to show that various phases of this evolution. The terms then in vogue in anthropological circles obviously were not only suitable for his view but also reflect his assessment of Primal Religion. The threefold progress of the savage society commenced with the development of speech, discovery of fire and ended with the invention of the bow and arrow.<sup>203</sup> In Dr. Ambedkar's perception this was the hunting stage.<sup>204</sup> Then started the second phase of barbaric society with the invention of pottery, domestication of animals and ended with the art of smelting iron.<sup>205</sup> In Dr. Ambedkar's perception this was the pastoral stage of society.<sup>206</sup> After which the human being developed the art of writing, thus conquering time, preserving knowledge and articulating aspiration, and as a result passed on to a higher stage of civilized life. From what Dr. Ambedkar argues it is evident that he accepted the existence of religion in both stages of social evolution of the *adivasi* or the Scheduled Tribes. In the assessment of Dr. Ambedkar the *adivasi* had not progressed beyond the barbaric social stage. We should also note that he did not blame them for their backward state; rather he contended that those who had flourished in advanced society had failed to carry the *adivasi* communities along with them.<sup>207</sup> He wrote,

(They) say that their civilization is older than any civilization and that (their) religion is superior to any other religion. If this is so then how is it that (it) failed to elevate these people, bring them enlightenment and hope; how is it that it failed even to reclaim them; how is it that it stood with folded hands when millions and millions were taking to a life of shame and crime? What is the answer to this?<sup>208</sup>

Despite what Dr. Ambedkar had observed of the *Adivasi* versus the advanced sections of the Indian society, he failed to take some important aspects of *adivasi* society into consideration. What he overlooked we must now undertake as we assess Indian Primal Religion. These are its three significant features: communitarian culture, egalitarianism and discord in nature. Let us discuss these under three

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<sup>203</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 88.

<sup>204</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3, 1987, p. 128.

<sup>205</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941) *Idem*, p. 88.

<sup>206</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 128.

<sup>207</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 92.

<sup>208</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 92.



subheadings: land, blood-descent and animals. It is very interesting to notice that Dr. Ambedkar engaged with these components that the anthropologists now consider as positive identities of the Primal Religion. What, however, is remarkable, is the use he makes of these to bring out social implications to the fore. He did this with the conviction in the existence of religion even in the earliest stages of human society when survival depended on hunting and subsequently on pastoral rearing.<sup>209</sup>

### 5.1 Land: A Cause For Social Stagnation

The Primal Religion was marked by a community oriented culture. Bediako scripts this communitarian feature as 'I am, because I participate'.<sup>210</sup> This orientation has been directly related with their relationship with land. The significance of the primitive perception of land takes us beyond treating land merely as a space; rather the land in a concrete way has provided unity and identity to the Scheduled Tribes of India since time immemorial. The basic primitive insight is that the contours of community life cannot be drawn independently of land. In other words, 'the land owns the people'.<sup>211</sup> In this insight we can glimpse a primitive common sense: no community without land, no land without community. From this symbiotic relationship between people and land, arose their consciousness of a collective, not private, ownership of land. Such collective sense of ownership became the foundation of their communitarian culture. The promoters of tribal interest have taken communitarian culture, superseding individualism, as vital to the life of the Scheduled Tribes. Curiously Dr. Ambedkar overlooked this complex but compelling relational system. Instead he interpreted the significance of land merely for the social progress of the Scheduled Tribes. Underscoring the drawbacks of their nomadic life style, he showed this progressive shift was due to the discovery of cultivation on land.

[A] Scheduled Tribe became fixed in its abode, in other words, became a settled community, when the new species of wealth was discovered. This new species was land. This happened when the Scheduled Tribes learned the art of farming and cultivating land. Wealth became fixed in one place when it changed its form from cattle to land. With this change Scheduled Tribes also became settled at the same place.<sup>212</sup>

However, the point though true was too simple to properly sketch the full complexity of shared life of the *adivasi* communities in their territories. In the modern age surprise may be expressed at Dr. Ambedkar's silence on the *adivasi*

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<sup>209</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 128.

<sup>210</sup> Bediako. *Primal Religion*, p. 28.

<sup>211</sup> Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta. *Adivasi Theology: Towards a Relevant Christian Theology for the Jharkhand Adivasis*. Ranchi: Department of Adivasi Theology and Cultural Research. 2009, p. 27.

<sup>212</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p. 274.

issues connected with their social isolation leading to identity crisis and economic sufferings, a condition that connects them to Dalits.<sup>213</sup>

A reason to omit this connection was that he rejected the Aryan invasion theory which not only portrayed the defeat of *adivasis* and Dalits but also explained their social relegation as *avarnas* i.e. without caste in contrast to the Aryans who perceived themselves as *savarnas* i.e. the one's belonging to caste. Closer to our times the *Adivasis* were alienated from their lands as they lost their ownership rights due to the misplaced perception of the British who failed to understand the communitarian nature of the land ownership of *adivasis*; instead they granted its proprietorship to the revenue collectors. Moreover the *adivasis* being in a pre-literate stage could neither use the British legal procedures of documentary proofs<sup>214</sup> to their advantage nor possessed documents to prove their claims. This alienation of their land which preserved their dead ancestors was a destructive blow to their religious culture which was embedded in their shared-life since the earliest times of human society.

## 5.2 Blood-descent: A Basis of Social Stratification

Social equality among the Scheduled Tribes in India has been figured out from the absence of caste system in their community.<sup>215</sup> Dr. Ambedkar's discussion on the practice of untouchability among the tribes should not be taken to mean social stratification similar to the caste system. Acknowledging greater social equality among those who claim a common descent of blood, his assumption of egalitarianism among the adivasi communities can be traced in his claim of the 'common blood and common kinship' of a tribe.<sup>216</sup> Attention should be drawn to the fact that Dr. Ambedkar did not use this as an evidence to support egalitarianism; rather he used this to show the fragmented condition of Scheduled Tribes.

Tribal organization being based on common blood and common kinship an individual born in one tribe could not join another tribe and become a member of it.<sup>217</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar uses the relationship of blood to bring out the evolution of stratified society in India. He perceives blood as a barrier against social mixture. This practice of exclusivity enabled each tribe to preserve its distinction. The maintenance of this distinction was to ensure the observance of the rule of exogamy. On this assumption he proceeded to solve the question of the origin of untouchability in India. He based

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<sup>213</sup> Godwin Shiri. 'Editorial' in *Religion and Society* Vol-50 No 3 September 2005. Bangalore: CISRS, Pg v.

<sup>214</sup> Leonard Fernando and G.Gispert-Sauch. *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 204-205.

<sup>215</sup> Godwin Shiri. 'Editorial' in *Religion and Society* Vol-50. No 3. September 2005, Bangalore: CISRS, Pg v.

<sup>216</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 275

<sup>217</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 275.

his hypothesis on the differing tribal origins of Aryans, Dravidians and Aborigines in India.<sup>218</sup> From among these some became settled and others were left as a floating population. These floating groups which Dr. Ambedkar called the 'Broken Men' of defeated tribes were looking for patrons.<sup>219</sup> Eventually the patrons who created a highly stratified caste society established them on their village periphery but reduced them to become Untouchables. From this Dr. Ambedkar deduced that the settled communities were of the same stock as were the Untouchables.<sup>220</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar's use of blood as the basis of tribal organization is ingenious and demands our attention. He contended that the caste system was a superimposition on the family system which had tribal origins. This is how he argued. He assumed that the people of India were originally organized on tribal lines. This meant that each tribe was made up of several clans and each clan made up of families. It is well known that every *adivasi* family regards a living creature as its ancestor who brought them into existence. Therefore, every family has a creature as its symbol. These are called totems. Sometimes different families have the same totem. Such families collectively became a clan. Later those tribal clans which stepped into the next progressive social stage began to call themselves as *kula* or *gotra*. Among them intermarriages were forbidden.

Families having common gotras were not allowed to intermarry for they were supposed to be descended from the same ancestor having the same blood running in their veins.<sup>221</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the *kula* and *gotra* in the present Indian society were forms of totems which long time ago had replaced the animals and birds of the tribal families.<sup>222</sup> The idea probably struck him from the etymology of totem i.e. 'brother-sister kin' where he saw the possibility of identifying it with *gotra*.<sup>223</sup>

### 5.3 Animals: A Root for Internecine Conflict

Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged that animals in the earliest forms of communities were used both as totems<sup>224</sup> as well as livestock.<sup>225</sup> Admittedly there are varieties of animals like lion, tortoise, monkey, dog, deer and other creatures like cock, cobra, peacock, fish, and owl regarded as totems, to which a respective tribe owes its origin. This belief is exhibited in several ways, for example a clan may be

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<sup>218</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 302-301.

<sup>219</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 276.

<sup>220</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 302.

<sup>221</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 303.

<sup>222</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 303.

<sup>223</sup> A Wati Longchar. *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India: An Introduction*, Jorhat: Eastern Theological College India, 2000, p. 54.

<sup>224</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 303.

<sup>225</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 274.

named after that creature, or it may regard it as supernatural or regard it to be too sacred for consumption.<sup>226</sup> Obviously totems constituted social customs and rituals of Primal Religion. Anthropologists have connected totemic practices to credit the Scheduled Tribes with preserving ecology and environmental harmony.<sup>227</sup> This relevance is appreciated in our contemporary times. Dr. Ambedkar, however, was not inclined to explore this perspective; instead he used the earliest forms of people's relationship with the animals to demonstrate inter-tribal strife. We have already discussed the contribution of totems to establish heterogeneous communities in the previous section. Now let us see how Dr. Ambedkar perceived the role of livestock in the life of the people in these earliest forms of society. With the knowledge of the Scheduled Tribes that Dr. Ambedkar had he held that nomadic life came into existence after the human being learnt the art of cattle rearing. They followed their cattle in search for better pastures. He wrote,

[T]he earliest form of the wealth held by Scheduled Tribes was cattle. [Sic! The nature of the] Scheduled Tribes was migratory because its wealth, namely the cattle, was migratory. Cattle went after new pastures. Scheduled Tribes by reason of its love for cattle, therefore, went wherever its cattle carried it.<sup>228</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar was quick to note that this nomadic life was not free from conflict. He identified three reasons for the people of these roaming groups to collide and confront each other. These were for: 1. Stealing cattle, 2. stealing women and, 3. stealthily grazing cattle in the pastures belonging to other tribes.<sup>229</sup> Far from harmony there were violent conflicts among the tribes where the resultant destruction of animals, people and environment which adversely affected the life of the people.

In this way Dr. Ambedkar's response to Primal Religion brings him out both as an original as well as a consistent thinker. He showed that the condition of the scheduled castes in India was backward. Their social isolation had been detrimental for their process. In the interest of conserving life, the tribes had become ethnocentric evident in the internecine conflicts. In as much as he took cognisance of the latest theories of his times he also critically discontinued with them. It is clear from the above discussion that he unfailingly followed the line of his theory i.e. the social role of religion in human life. However his theories have never been made much use of for at least two reasons. Firstly, not many scholars are persuaded by his arguments which sound bright but not convincing. Secondly, his writings have not been intensely promoted. In his line of reasoning one can see that the scheme of

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<sup>226</sup> Longchar. *The Tribal Religious Traditions*, p. 55.

<sup>227</sup> Longchar. *The Tribal Religious Traditions*, p. 57.

<sup>228</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 274.

<sup>229</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Untouchables' (1948), p, 275.

governance that Primal Religion offered was not only undeveloped but also their society was fragmented and politically ignorant. It offered no hope for Dalits to progress into modernity.

## 6 Conclusion

IT IS CLEAR FROM OUR STUDY that Dr. Ambedkar did not use terms like savage, barbaric and primitive for the scheduled tribes in a positive sense. In order to bring out the social contrast between scheduled tribes and affluent society in India Dr. Ambedkar highlighted their backwardness. In a positive sense primal refers to the original instincts interiorly felt by every person. These may be the feeling of the uncanny, wonder and awe,<sup>230</sup> which are primal but not primitive as such.<sup>231</sup> Primal Religion attended to these interiorly felt needs in human beings often exhibited in cries of anguish and anxiety and at the same time called for assistance through rituals.<sup>232</sup> Dr. Ambedkar, however, made no such distinctions between personal and social aspects of Primal Religion. His concern was to identify the scheme of governance that the Primal Religion offered for organizing society, and to assess its relevance to study religion in the modern times. He found that the Primary Religion did not offer a fully developed scheme as such; rather, it made conservation of life its chief interest in the primitive society and turned it into a sacred norm. This made religion useful for the society in its primal stages. From this Dr. Ambedkar concluded that *utility* was a fundamental intention of an authentic religion. Accordingly the authenticity of a religion, in his view, could be assessed on the anvil of its utility i.e. by its capacity to conserve life. Although Dr. Ambedkar highlighted utility as a norm to assess religion, he did not apply it to test the Primal Religion of modern India. It was not worth the effort because the Primal Religions were fossilized forms of animistic practices of primeval society.

Beside this, Dr. Ambedkar studied the root of untouchability in the earliest forms of society. Among the *adivasis* and indigenous tribes all over the world whatever was perceived as a threat to social cohesion and harmful to human life was treated with caution. Such a person or an article was regarded as contaminated. The caution was normally segregation from the rest of the community. Here Dr Ambedkar had pointed out that in the tribes although the contaminated person or article was untouchable, this state was only temporary. The rituals could restore a person by ridding him/her of contamination.

It must be accepted that Primal Religion could not help the *Adivasi* communities to cope with the modernity that besets them on all sides. Their communitarian worldview, despite its fine lessons, has been outdated by laws which

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<sup>230</sup> Miller and Schwartzman. *Our Religion and Our Neighbors*, p. 15.

<sup>231</sup> Frykenberg. *Christianity in India*, p.10.

<sup>232</sup> Frykenberg. *Christianity in India*, p.10.

aim to protect private properties as a legitimate right of its owners. Their pre-literary state is a handicap in the modern world where the systems depend on literacy. Therefore, as Fernando contends that to update their worldview the *adivasi* communities will convert to another religion and their Primal Religion of oral forms will be subsumed into the new religions they adopt.<sup>233</sup> Most unacceptable to Dr. Ambedkar would be the caste traits assimilated by the earliest forms of communities in India. This is attested in the research projects undertaken in more recent times. For instance Nag's report reveals practices of untouchability observed by the *Oraon* tribe of Jharkhand against other tribal groups.<sup>234</sup> Admittedly Dr. Ambedkar did not find Primal Religion useful for Dalits except for expounding his hypotheses. He therefore turned to the religions of scriptures which had made their impact on the modern society. The question before him was this; if Primal Religion was obsolete what other suitable options were there for Dalits? To answer this query we will start our investigation of Dr. Ambedkar's response beginning with the Hindus.

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<sup>233</sup> Leonard Fernando and G.Gispert-Sauch. *Op Cit.*, 2004, p. 208.

<sup>234</sup> Soumen Nag. The Tribal Population Pattern in Dooarg (North Bengal) in *Journey with the Tribals*. N.B. Mitra (ed.). Durgapur: Tribal Research Centre, 2006, p. 134.

## Chapter Four

### Response to Hindus

#### 1. Introduction

A vast majority of the Indian population is Hindu. Admittedly their religion not only exerts influence on them but it affects all other Indians too.<sup>235</sup> Its grip on its adherents is obvious in their refusal to espouse any other among the many religions that coexist as sizable minorities. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar's writing on Hinduism which exceeds more than on any other religion is understandable. However, one should not be misled while reading his articles on this subject. This can easily happen because he pitilessly criticises Hinduism. In an emotive speech which he wrote in 1936 but was never delivered, he challenged his audience to pioneer reforms.

Yours is more difficult than the other national cause, namely, swaraj. In the fighting for swaraj you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation and that too your own. But this is more important than swaraj.<sup>236</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar held that the national leaders should have taken up social reform as their chief task. By reform he not only meant a rational approach to religion but also the reordering of the national society on the principle of justice. So his aim was to transform Hinduism to the extent as to make it yield egalitarianism as its ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance for the society. This was important to suitably prepare the nation for adopting democracy as a way of life. Now the question before Dr. Ambedkar was this, what kind of order for human conduct and society were the Hindus in the mid twentieth century to maintain? Did it make them good, united and strong? And if it was of the right kind for Dalits to adopt? He found that Hinduism was ripe with serious flaws that needed corrections. Interestingly we will also see that the seeds of reform were already inherent in Hinduism's great tradition. Sometimes he made use of these. With these preliminary remarks we will proceed to study Dr. Ambedkar's response to Hindus.

#### 2. The Hurdle for a Great Religion

Granted that he remained within the Hindu fold till the last few months of his life, which shows his closeness to his religion, but what he experienced there shocked him, more so because he suffered for being a *Mahar*, an untouchable. The three following examples of his experiences bring out the fact that a Dalit is a rejected person: these were in the city, in his office and with Mahatma Gandhi.

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<sup>235</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 80.

<sup>236</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 80.

Among other instances these three demonstrate that practice of untouchability is widespread in India and that even Dr. Ambedkar was not spared.

### **2.1 In the Maharaja's City**

This story is of a personal crisis that Dr. Ambedkar went through in the early days of his career in the Maharaja's city of Baroda. He was surprised and hurt to find that the atmosphere of the city was most unwelcoming and hostile to him. This is how Keer, who wrote his biography, describes the event when he reached Baroda in mid September 1917,

Generally any dignitary visiting Baroda was received by the courtiers at the station, but there was no body to receive Ambedkar, he being an untouchable. He and his brother searched for a boarding and lodging place throughout Baroda, but nobody entertained him because of his caste. In the end he stayed at the Parsee hotel where he did not declare his caste, but when the Parsees came to know they ganged together to beat him up and made him vacate the place...no other Hindu or Muslim would provide him shelter. Ambedkar wrote to the maharaja who asked his Diwan to make arrangements for Ambedkar's lodging, but even he expressed his helplessness. Dr. Ambedkar wandered on an empty stomach, sat under a tree and wept profusely. Highly qualified though he was, an untouchable was treated as the lowest of the low in Hindu society.<sup>237</sup>

This example shows that intolerant behaviour of other people interiorly breaks a Dalit. After this Dr. Ambedkar never shed tears; rather we meet him as a stronger man who did not hesitate to express his resolve and firmness to reform the Hindus.

### **2.2 In Maharaja's Service**

Another instance was in the State service of the Maharaja of Baroda. The bond of his educational scholarship required a ten year service in the Baroda State. With the aim to appoint Dr. Ambedkar as his finance minister the Maharaja planned a series of placements for him to gain experience. The first was as a military secretary. But it turned out to be an unpleasant experience. Why? Once again we find the cause of this in the practice of untouchability among the Hindus. It is known that the caste system is a social order of ritual social hierarchy. It is organized in a descending order where the degree of purity decreases and pollution increases in this descent. This results in producing acute anxiety for the clean castes to guard their purity by ensuring that nothing unclean touches them. Dalits by virtue of their birth are regarded as polluting beings and so the people of clean castes guard against physical contact with them. This practice is known as untouchability and Dalits are called the

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<sup>237</sup> Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Translated by Asha Damle) New Delhi: National Biography. National Book Trust India, 2007, pp.15-16.



“untouchables”. Keer vividly portrays the way Dr. Ambedkar was treated which created an impossible situation for him to continue his service.

The poor illiterate peons thought it sinful to hand over office papers and files to him. They flung the bundles of files and hurled papers at his desk. They rolled the mats when he got up to go. Drinking water was not available to him in office.<sup>238</sup>

In mid November 1917 he left for Mumbai. Though shocked, it did not curb Dr. Ambedkar’s intellectual capacity to search for the root of such unfriendly behaviour and untouchability.

### 2.3 In Mahatma ‘s Presence

The third instant I have chosen is of strange indifference from a person of national stature. At the appointed time Dr. Ambedkar visited Mahatma Gandhi on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1931 in Mumbai. It was difficult to believe that Mahatma Gandhi had failed to notice the entrance of Dr. Ambedkar with a retinue. This is how Keer describes the event,

The Doctor and his party bowed to Gandhi and sat on a blanket. In the characteristic way which Gandhi observed in dealing with non-Muslims and non-European leaders and representatives, he did not look at first for a while at Ambedkar and kept chatting with Miss Slade and others. Ambedkar’s men now feared that a little more indifference on the part of Gandhi and a collision would follow.<sup>239</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar disliked being treated with contempt and for him this behaviour was unreasonable. Indeed as Dr. Ambedkar grew in stature as a national leader he had expected others to treat him as an equal human being at every level. But he was disappointed. The question before him was this: What was the basis of intolerant and unfriendly behaviour both of the uneducated as well as of the educated Indians? Was human conduct synchronized with social order? If this was so then the need was to identify this order and eliminate it. For him this exercise was of key importance to make Hinduism genuinely a strong binding force for the people of India.

## 3 Exploring the Basis

To understand the social behaviour of Indians, Dr. Ambedkar reflected on India’s society and culture. He found that both were deeply entrenched in religious belief. The overarching feature of Hindu religion is its *dharma*. He argued that both, people’s behaviour and the order of society, were shaped by their beliefs i.e. what their *dharma* had taught as ideal. Therefore, his objective was to understand what

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<sup>238</sup> Keer. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, p. 34.

<sup>239</sup> Keer. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, p. 165.

sort of society did the Hindu *dharma* aim to create? In this section I will show Dr. Ambedkar's findings in three areas namely, scripture, doctrine and philosophy.

### 3.1 Scripture

Dr. Ambedkar began to explore the scriptural basis of social order and human relationships of Hindus. The nature of his inquiry can be reduced to two queries: What constituted the central point in the Hindu scriptures? What kind of *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* did they propound? To make his line of thinking clear I have collected his ideas under three themes namely, *Shruti*, *Smriti* and *Bhagavad Gita*.

#### 3.1.1 Shruti

Dr. Ambedkar accepted the meaning of *shruti* as that which is revealed by being heard<sup>240</sup> implying its supreme spiritual authority.<sup>241</sup> This status though conferred on the *Vedas* alone,<sup>242</sup> did include a wider corpus of religious texts.<sup>243</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was, therefore, interested to unearth the criterion for including texts in the list of *shruti*.<sup>244</sup> He found that this was neither controlled by any rule nor tradition<sup>245</sup> but it was purely the privilege of the priestly caste i.e. the Brahmins.<sup>246</sup> Therefore, in his view they had the advantage to create sacred texts for their own benefit especially to secure a privileged social position.<sup>247</sup> In recent times this has also been shared by scholars like Lipner.<sup>248</sup> Surprise may well be expressed at Dr. Ambedkar's assertion that the *Vedas* 'contain nothing that can be said to be spiritually or morally elevating'<sup>249</sup> because several streams of spirituality found germinal ideas in them. For instance *bhakti* in its seminal form is cited by Bharati who writes that, 'however, much the *vedatins* may try to prove that sin is merely an error, *avidya*, etc., yet from time immemorial (from the Vedic period down to the *bhakti* movements which

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<sup>240</sup> Lipner explains *Shruti* as referring 'to the hearing of the inviolable word'. Julius Lipner. *Hindus: Their religious beliefs and practices*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 74.

<sup>241</sup> Klaus K. Klostermair., *A Survey of Hinduism*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Pvt. Ltd., 1990, p. 64.

<sup>242</sup> Dayanand Bharati. *Understanding Hinduism*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Pvt. Ltd., 2005, p. 82.

<sup>243</sup> Wendy Doniger. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2009, pp. 166-67.

<sup>244</sup> He endlessly wrestled with the ambiguity surrounding the exclusion of *Sutras* from *Shruti*, vis-à-vis the *Brahmanas* which later seem to have lost that status. A similar struggle is evident for *Upanishads* where hostility to the ritualism of *Vedas* was eventually transcended by making it subservient to them. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 62-70.

<sup>245</sup> We may consider several criteria for a text to be included legitimately as *Shruti*, Dr. Ambedkar however felt that one would expect that the elevation of a text to this category would be based either 1. On its authorship and content or, 2. On people's consent or, 3. Determined by priests. By eliminating the first two categories Dr. Ambedkar deduced the plausibility of the third option. *Idem Writings and Speeches*. Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 60.

<sup>246</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), pp. 5-6.

<sup>247</sup> Julius Lipner. *Hindus: Their religious beliefs and practices*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 64.

<sup>248</sup> Lipner writes, 'Is Hinduism then best summed up as the Brahmin way of life? The answer depends on one's perspective. Most of the Hindus were not and are not Brahmins. Many, especially those in circumstances most vulnerable to the traditional exercise of Brahmin power, understandably resent being represented by or assimilated into Brahminic culture. But it is undeniable that from earliest times Brahminic culture has overshadowed the Hindu way of life'. Cf. Julius Lipner. *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>249</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 52.

dominate present day Hinduism) we come across the awareness of sin and guilt. "It is I, alone, who against you have sinned" (Rig Veda iv.124a) shows the acceptance of moral responsibility of sin by the Vedic man.<sup>250</sup> Like the *bhakti*, other streams in Hinduism also do the same. Dr. Ambedkar missed this out.

In some other ways also Dr. Ambedkar was unfair to the Hindus. For instance he bypassed the modern reform movements like *Brahmo Samaj* or *Arya Samaj* which earnestly sought to change both, society and the behaviour of its adherents. Dr. Ambedkar did not consider it a matter of significance to discuss their views e.g. Swami Dayananda is believed to have re-classified Hindu religious literature in two newer categories, namely 1. *Arsha*, those revealed through the *rishis* and were therefore infallibly authoritative, and, 2. *Anarsha*. These were the rest of the literature which did not have this derivation and were therefore not inerrant.<sup>251</sup> The watershed for this reclassification was the *Mahabharata*.<sup>252</sup> For him, therefore, the perfecting of Hinduism lay in returning to the practices of this idyllic time. Dr. Ambedkar misses out on this too.

Be this as it may, Dr. Ambedkar could neither trace the central concern of *shruti* nor the yardstick to establish a text of that status. Now if in Dr. Ambedkar's contention the sacred status of texts was alleviated or diminished by Brahmins to suit their own advantage, then the question must be what was the interest of the priestly caste in doing this? We shall find the answer to this query when we reach the end of our discussion. But now let us turn to the second theme, namely, *smriti*.

### 3.1.2 Smriti

It is accepted that *smriti* meant that which has been remembered.<sup>253</sup> Dr. Ambedkar contended that if *shruti* was divinely sanctioned, then *smriti* had social acceptance.<sup>254</sup> Thus both had their relevance but *smriti* had a secondary status. This is generally accepted now. But in tracing the history surrounding the debates in connection with the sacred texts Dr. Ambedkar found that the status of *smriti* had shifted from one extreme of the scale, of being regarded as subservient to *Vedas*,<sup>255</sup> to another, that of being placed above the *Vedas*.<sup>256</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was aware of a complex process of reasoning to justify these changes.<sup>257</sup> To explain this process he uncovered what he regarded as the central point that regulated such intellectual

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<sup>250</sup> Bharati. *Understanding Hinduism*. p. 208.

<sup>251</sup> Lipner. *Hindus*, p. 68.

<sup>252</sup> Accordingly if post-*Mahabharata* period was not as enlightened as the era before that then the religious literature of pre-*Mahabharata* was classified in the category of the *Arsha*. Lipner describes Swami Dayanand's claim for this period as 'free from casteism, priest-craft, sex-discrimination, polytheism, idolatry and so on. Cf. Julius Lipner. 1994, p. 68.

<sup>253</sup> Klostermair, *A Survey of Hinduism*. p. 67.

<sup>254</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 56.

<sup>255</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 56.

<sup>256</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 57.

<sup>257</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 58-59.

undertakings. His insight was that such an exercise was not to make people contented but to impose social order.<sup>258</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar argued that the task of doing this in a specific way was the privilege of the Brahmins. With his knowledge of Hinduism he pointed out that this they did by keeping the authority of controlling the contents and status of the religious texts with themselves. We can understand this because in the older times priestly castes were the lettered people in the community. Dr. Ambedkar for this reason makes them solely responsible for weaning away the Hindus from the foundational function of religion. He pointed out that the Brahmin-priests wrote scriptures primarily for their own advantage. This entailed inequality of power and prestige where the Brahmins occupied the top status while all the rest of the people were collected into various castes in a descending manner of status. The Brahmin caste was the most honoured and the Shudra was the least, while many others were left outside the system of the four castes. This was the *chaturvarna* or the four storey caste system, which became and is still the norm of the Indian society generally. Let us now turn to the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### 3.1.3 Bhagavad Gita

The popularity of the Bhagavad Gita is well known. It is extensively read and cherished by a large section of people. It opens up many vistas to meet a variety of human needs. These are intellectual, devotional, moral and social in nature. However, the affirmation of caste in the Gita as sacrosanct was sufficient to disappoint Dr. Ambedkar. To this we will return later but first we will take up his discussion on *karma marga* i.e. the way of salvation through *karmakanda* i.e. sacred rituals.

Taking into account the relevant texts on *karma marga*<sup>259</sup> Dr. Ambedkar contended that the *Gita* had nothing to do with 'activity or inactivity, quietism or energy'<sup>260</sup> rather it meant specific observances, such as *yajnas* as a way to salvation.<sup>261</sup> He drew attention to this when he wrote,

[I]f one were to keep to the meaning of the word karma yoga as one finds it in the Bhagavad Gita itself one would be convinced that in speaking of karma yoga the Bhagavad Gita is referring to nothing but the dogmas of karma kanda as propounded by Jaimini which it tries to renovate and strengthen.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 182.

<sup>259</sup> Bhagwat Gita Chapters 7 to 12.

<sup>260</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution' (1946) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai, 1987, p. 362.

<sup>261</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution' (1946), p. 362.

<sup>262</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution' (1946), p. 363.

Clearly he disagreed with nationalists like Narayan Vaman Tilak who he argued universalize words like *karma* and *yoga* of the Gita differently as action and knowledge. Granted that such an exercise in his view was unjustified nonetheless it is strange why Dr. Ambedkar failed to appreciate the attempts of modern Hindus to reapply the ancient texts in a newer context to inspire people.<sup>263</sup> One reason was his suspicion that in these exercises social inequality was rationalized. He made this clear in his dealing with the Gita's dogma of *Chaturvarna* i.e. the system of four castes. What he found difficult to understand was Gita's defense of the four *varnas* (castes) on the basis of three *gunas* (qualities) of the Samkhya philosophy. Seeing that there was no correspondence between these two systems, he argued, 'How can a system of four *varnas* be defended on the basis of a philosophy which does not recognize more than three *varnas*?'<sup>264</sup> In his view the argument in *Gita* was not a naive flaw but its purpose was to validate the unequal social order based on caste system.

However, there was one important thing that Dr. Ambedkar noticed in the Gita in connection with the caste system. Even if the Gita had used the Samkhya philosophy to 'bolster and buttress the *varna* idea', the contrast he saw with the present caste system was that in the Gita, *varna* was not based on birth; instead it was fixed according to one's innate qualities.<sup>265</sup> This did not compel a son to follow his father's occupation. Now this example can also be viewed as the Gita's strength. Had Dr. Ambedkar taken this possibility seriously, he could have advocated the mellowing of the rigidity of caste by garnering its scriptural basis. Efforts could be justified of those who crossed the castes lines by taking up occupations suitable for them resulting in a greater contentment in such people's lives. Unfortunately Dr. Ambedkar fell short of exploring the full potential for reform and reordering of society that this alternative offered. But it is clear in the above discussion that in Dr. Ambedkar's contention the *chaturvarna* i.e. the four level of caste system, was the accepted order of the Gita and other Hindu scripture. This caste-system or the *varna-vyavastha* was the *dharma* on which everything pertaining to society rested. Accordingly the scheme of social order was not merely hierarchical and but rigidly unequal. This sort of social inequality was responsible for encouraging the people of clean castes to treat Dalits with contempt.

### 3.2 Doctrines

With a focus on Dr. Ambedkar's concern to understand the link between the Hindu social order and the behaviour of his coreligionists, we will in this section

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<sup>263</sup> B.R.Ambedkar, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution' (1946), p. 362.

<sup>264</sup> B.R.Ambedkar, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution' (1946), p. 364.

<sup>265</sup> B.R.Ambedkar, 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945) idem *Writings and Speeches*. Vol-9. Mumbai, 1991, p. 290.

attempt to explore his reflections on what constituted the Hindu doctrines. We can divide his thinking into three subtopics: Divinity, Salvation and Time.

### 3.2.1 Divinity

Normally transcendence is associated with deities, i.e. the heavenly beings, who impinge upon the life and interest of the terrestrial beings. However, such mythologies are not simple tales; rather they are complex plots with subplots which may include not only unexpected moral standard of the deities but also their unstable cultic status. Admittedly Dr. Ambedkar struggled to understand the nature of transcendence in these mythologies. This problem is evident in his discussion on the role of *Brahma* and *Vishnu* in creation and the preservation of the world. The devotees of both these deities had developed different myths to propagate the worth of one over the other.<sup>266</sup> The instance of this is in the myths that expose the struggle for primacy between these two deities each claiming to be the first-born in the whole creation. When *Brahma*'s devotees claimed the primacy of their deity, the devotees of *Vishnu* played him down claiming the supremacy of their deity.<sup>267</sup> Finally *Brahma* in the pantheon was remotely placed as a creator.<sup>268</sup> Such fate was accorded not only to *Brahma* but also to various other deities. For Dr. Ambedkar the phenomenal ascent and decline of popular Hindu deities in their power, prestige and popularity beginning from the Vedic times was extraordinary.

In the history of Hindu gods one finds it a very common experience that some gods have been worshipped for a time and subsequently their worship had been abandoned and the gods themselves have been thrown on the scrapheap. Quite new gods are adopted and their worship goes on with an intensity of devotion which is full and overflowing. Again the new gods are abandoned and are replaced by a fresh crop of new gods. So the cycle goes on. In this way the Hindu gods are always undergoing rise and fall—a phenomenon which is unknown in the history of any other community in the world.<sup>269</sup>

The validity of the ascent and decline of deities for Dr. Ambedkar was questionable for two reasons: firstly, due to the ruling of the Rig Veda which underlined equality in splendour, power and authority of three thousand three hundred and nine divinities. It says, “None of you O gods is small or young: you are all great” and secondly the inequality of deities was only a latter emergence.<sup>270</sup> So we see that for

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<sup>266</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 72. Dr. Ambedkar listing of these incarnations in tabular form is interesting. Six incarnations in the stories in *Hari Vamsa*, ten each in *Narayani Akhyani* and *Varaha Purana*, twelve according to *Vayu Purana* and almost twenty two according to *Bhagwat Purana*.

<sup>267</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 73-74.

<sup>268</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 75.

<sup>269</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 81.

<sup>270</sup> In his foot note Dr. Ambedkar cited Rig Veda I.139, iii.6, 9, VIII 28.1, VIII 30.2 and VIII 35.3 Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 81.

Dr. Ambedkar the multiple incarnations of *Vishnu* and the ascent and decline of various deities instead of constituting a solid centre-point for doctrine leaves it fluid.

In the area of legends, the reason why Dr. Ambedkar contended the figure of *Rama* to be more satisfactory was due to his ability to maintain his divine status. It had remained unchallenged through the evolution of legends in the Hindu world. For Dr. Ambedkar the dramatic suspense of *Rama's* ignorance of his divinity was inconsequential.<sup>271</sup> Nonetheless, he surprises the reader by asserting that *Krishna*, *Rama*, *Shiva* and *Vishnu* were anti-Vedic.<sup>272</sup> What's more calling was his argument concerning the nature of these deities. He pointed out that the deities or *devas* were not divine transcendent beings; instead they were a community in a position of domination over the Aryans. He wrote,

One does not know what to say of the scholar who first translated the Sanskrit word *deva* by the English word god. It was the greatest blunder which has resulted in confusion and has prevented a proper understanding of the social life of the Aryans as revealed in the Vedic literature. That *deva* was the name of a community is beyond question. That *rakshas*, *daityas*, *danavas* are also names of different communities in the same manner as the words *Arya* and *dasyu* are, must also be accepted without question.<sup>273</sup>

This is an astonishing and an interesting idea. Nonetheless, the source of this information is unclear. It could well be that this struck him as plausible from the writings of Edward Moor, a member of the Asiatic Society of Kolkata, whose book *The Hindu Pantheon* had become well known in the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>274</sup> For instance Moor observed that, 'those who follow the *Purva Mimamsa*, or philosophy of *Jaimini*, admit no such incarnations of deities, but insist that *devas* were mere mortals...' moreover *devas* were so much like human beings that it was impossible for Dr. Ambedkar to explain their immoral behaviour otherwise.<sup>275</sup> Yet Dr. Ambedkar was unfair in blaming the scholars for translating *devas* as "gods" i.e.

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<sup>271</sup> Dr. Ambedkar cites the following passage from the Ramayana in his article Riddle No. 11, 'On being addressed by these Gods, Rama became surprised and replied: "I regard myself as a man, Rama, son of Dashrath; do you, divine being tell me who and whence I am". On this Brahma replying to Rama said: "hear my true word, O being of genuine power. Thou art the god, glorious lord, Narayana armed with the discus.' Cf B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 96.

<sup>272</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 85.

<sup>273</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 301

<sup>274</sup> The Rev'd W.O. Simpson, the editor of the new edition of Edward Moor's book *The Hindu Pantheon* published in 1864 gives an introduction of the author. Edward Moor, he points out, 'was with the British contingent under Captain Little, which acted with the Mahrattas against Tippoo Saib in 1790 and 1791. We afterwards find him at Poona, Hyderabad and Bombay. During this time, he lived apparently on terms of close intimacy, with the various native chiefs of Western India. We are not precisely informed when he returned to England, but it appears to have been shortly before the publication of his books, that is, somewhere about 1810. (Cf. Edward Moor, F.R.S.. *The Hindu Pantheon*. London: Trubner & Co. 1864, p.vii.)

<sup>275</sup> Edward Moor, F.R.S.. *The Hindu Pantheon*. London: Trubner & Co. 1864, p. 10. Dr. Ambedkar used the 1810 Edition as one of the resource books for his articles collected under the title *Riddles in Hinduism* subsequently published as Vol-4 of his *Writings and Speeches*.

immortal beings of splendour because there was a reasonable ground to accept this meaning. For instance William Dwight Whitney, Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology in Yale College, observes that ‘ “*dyu*” in Sanskrit signified equivocally the bright “sky” or the shining “day”, and that “*deva*” its regular derivative meant “shining” or “heavenly” was like the outcrop of a rich vein, tempting the miner to explore its hidden depths’.<sup>276</sup> Be this as it may, Dr. Ambedkar’s contended that the behaviour normal to *devas*, including Rama and Krishna, was incompatible with the moral standard of human behaviour.

Now, even if we were to accept Dr. Ambedkar’s recommended meaning of the term *deva*, his contention that the Aryans on the one hand served under the lordship of *devas*, and on the other hand they had subjugated the *dasyus* while they still waged war against *asuras* and *rakshasas* with the help of *devas* would only be conjectural at this stage. The fundamental point in Dr. Ambedkar’s discussion on social practices in the ancient Aryan communities comprising of the *Brahmins*, the *rishis*, the *devas*, and deities like *Krishna* demonstrates that the practice of fertility rites, gambling, excessive alcoholic consumption, promiscuity, incest due to deficient rules of prohibited degrees of consanguinity were socially acceptable.<sup>277</sup> Interestingly in the subsequent era such practices were viewed as immoral and were suppressed. Dr. Ambedkar notes evidence of this in *Gautama-dharma* where the sutra “*na deva charitrama chareta*” is indicative of the guidance that the acts of *devas* and *rishis* were not to be emulated. In my opinion, such revisions in subsequent eras are evidence of a religion which was alive and was cherished by people. This, therefore, should be viewed as strength of Hinduism.

In connection with the immoral behaviour of divine beings, Dr. Ambedkar would have welcomed Wendy Doniger’s recent interesting observation that ‘indeed the gods often lie and cheat far more than the antigods (*asuras*) do; power corrupts and divine power corrupts divinely.’ but her more interesting insight reinforcing Dr. Ambedkar’s view was that since gods lived on sacrificial offerings made available by devout humans, the gods wished humans to be virtuous, for only then would they continue to offer sacrifices.<sup>278</sup> So we can see that Dr. Ambedkar highlighted three things: one that divine beings were not always moral beings; two that no deity was continuously worshipped; and three that the number of incarnations was never stable. Now Dr. Ambedkar was left to inquire—if not gods what then in Hinduism was responsible to order human conduct? But before we answer this query we should complete studying Dr. Ambedkar’s view on those doctrines which in a variety of ways controlled the attitudes and behaviour of the adherents. The point of

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<sup>276</sup> William Dwight Whitney *Oriental and Linguistic Studies*. (Second Series) London: Trubner & Co., 1875, p. 150.

<sup>277</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Riddles in Hinduism’ (1956), pp. 294-303.

<sup>278</sup> Wendy Doniger. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2009, p. 109



this discussion was that neither the gods nor the anti-gods were interested in setting norms for human conduct or creating a just society.

### 3.2.2 Salvation

Dr. Ambedkar drew attention to two alternative views of salvation within the Hindu traditions i.e. the *Shaiva* and the *Vishnu* sects respectively. The *Shaiva*<sup>279</sup> explained it mystically, diluting the significance of the material world whereas the *Vaishnava*<sup>280</sup> explained it as excelling in one's duty to preserve the world with *dharma*. We may recall that the *dharma* was a person's social occupation prescribed by his/her caste into which he/she was born. The *Shaiva* understood salvation as union or *Sayujya* with Shiva by annihilating all physical and mental fetters. This made social involvement for the betterment of human life irrelevant. Conversely the *vaishnavas* believed that,

If *dharma* perished the world perished too, and since the world ought not to perish, for it was a manifestation of the glory of the cosmic *purusha*, a person's duty consisted in doing everything he could for preserving the *dharma*.<sup>281</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar underlined the *vaishnava* tradition of salvation. The idea of Vishnu incarnating as an *avatar* from time to time in this world lay in the understanding that he did so to preserve the world from the destruction wrought by *adharma* i.e. when things were not ordered according to *dharma's* prescription.<sup>282</sup> Indeed excelling in duty meant that people should sustain themselves only within the prescribed occupation of their castes. Therefore society had to be ordered according to this requirement. In this way Dr. Ambedkar could see no respite for Dalits even in the religious idea of salvation because preservation of *dharma* was the basis to exclude Dalits from human

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<sup>279</sup> Accordingly Shiva in form of Rudra is seen as a Destroyer of everything that causes a person's separation from the supreme Shiva. Consequently a person who is able to accomplish *Sayujya* or union with Shiva is the one who has, as Dr. Ambedkar has put it, transcended 'his body and mind, pleasure and pain, and all opposites and dualities. He should attain union or *Sayujya* with Shiva in which condition he would not be able to regard himself as separate from Shiva. Till he reached that stage he was imperfect, however pure he might be, however eligible he might be, for the highest state of *Sayujya*; for those who are eligible had attained only subordinate stages of *Salokya*, *Samipya* and *Sarupya*. That was also a reason why the doctrine of Avatars did not appeal to the Shaiva. God as an Avatar was only a limited being, one who had the capacity, perhaps of releasing himself from his fetters but not one without fetters'. Behind this position lay the Shaivite view that the world was full of pain and misery—as *Pasha* of fetter. The one who was bound was therefore a *pashu* the word also used for domesticated animals who are bound. The aim of was to destroy this *Pasha* and set a person free. Accordingly the authority of the *Shastras* i.e. the sacred scriptures that aimed to preserve the order and the caste system to preserve the Dharma were at the best tolerated if not rejected by the Shaivites. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 76.

<sup>280</sup> The Vaishnavites understood salvation with a different flavour. In as much as it meant being united with the Supreme Being it also accepted one's consciousness of this union. To be united with the universe was acceptable because the universe was viewed as an aspect of the imperishable Supreme Being. Therefore the Vaishnavites were in favour of the preservation of the universe and accordingly Vishnu was regarded as the Preserver. Accordingly the emphasis was on the preservation of all rules and regulations so that harmony was established in the world. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 77.

<sup>281</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 76.

<sup>282</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 77.

society. This explains why the forward castes were so particular to Drive out the Dalits to the margins of social order.

However, what Dr. Ambedkar did not appreciate here was the argumentative aspect of Indian religious thinking. As we have seen above there are two ways of understanding salvation. With an alternative in hand one can use it to convince the people to adopt the progressive option and abandon the regressive one. But Dr. Ambedkar did not pursue this line.

### 3.2.3 Time

In a way the philosophy of time determines people's outlook to life. Philosophers developed five ways of measuring time. Beginning with year that comprised of 365 days they went on to create enormous units of time. He writes,

The units into which time is broken up for the purposes of reckoning it which are prevalent among the Hindus have not deserved the attention which their extraordinary character call for (*sic!*). This is a matter which forms one of the principal subject matter of Puranas. There are according to the Puranas five measures of time (1) Varsha, (2) Yuga, (3) Mahayuga, (4) Manvantara, (5) Kalpa.<sup>283</sup>

On this idea of the vastness of time were based the myths of the *Purana* which were plotted around creation and the dissolution of the universe.<sup>284</sup> Among these vast units the most significant one is the endless cycle of *Manvantara*.<sup>285</sup> We know that mythological cosmologies do not aim to build scientific attitude but it was a way to meaningfully grasp the infinite in a pre-scientific age. The trouble, however, is that Dr. Ambedkar felt that there was something more than what met the eye. For instance he writes,

Why kalpa should have been divided into maha-yuga and why a maha-yuga should have been sub-divided into four yugas, krita, treta, dwapara and kali is a riddle which needs explanation.<sup>286</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar suspected that the doctrine of *Manvantara*<sup>287</sup> was invented to justify inequality of the caste system. This was so because he reckoned that the anxiety to preserve social order was the fundamental concern of *dharma*.<sup>288</sup> He pointed out that

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<sup>283</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 307.

<sup>284</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 310.

<sup>285</sup> Manu-antara i.e. The life or period of a Manu, 4,30,000 years. Cf. *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*. John Dowson Kegan Paul Trench Tubner & Co Ltd 1928, p. 202.

<sup>286</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 314.

<sup>287</sup> Klostermaier. *A Survey of Hinduism*. p. 112-113 Klostermaier also notes the endless cycles of creation and destruction. He described it as historical pessimism. The *Manvantara* also fell in this category. What Dr. Ambedkar questions is its purpose and it was to determine this that Dr. Ambedkar undertook a detailed study of the fourteen *Manvantaras*. The present is the seventh one; seven more ages are yet to come.

<sup>288</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 275.

this social order was the caste system. He explained *Manvantara* by using contemporary example of governments where he placed *Manu* as the Officer-in-Chief with seven *rishi* or wise subordinates and the god *Indra*. They constituted the heavenly government to rule the earth for a term of one *Manvantara*. As he wrote,

The Brahmins had a theory of the government of their country from heaven. This seems to be the ideas underlying what is called Manvantara. The ideas underlying Manvantara is related to the political government of the country. It is founded on the belief that the government of the world is entrusted to a corporation for a fixed period. This corporation consists of an officer called Manu and Saptarishis (seven rishis) and one Indra conducting the affairs of the country from their seats in heaven without consulting the people or ascertaining their wishes. This period of the reign by one corporation is called a Manvantara after Manu the premier authority in the ruling set. When the reign of Manu is over he is succeeded by another Manu and so on. As in the case of the yugas, the Manvantaras also move in cycles. Fourteen Manvantaras make one cycle.<sup>289</sup>

It is obvious, therefore, that the existence of a government that disenfranchised everyone in the interest of the privileged castes<sup>290</sup> could still be justified as destined by the heavenly rulers of the *Manvantara*.<sup>291</sup>

Another theory of time that Dr. Ambedkar discussed in detail was *yuga*, meaning age. Among the four *yugas*, the last one *kali yuga* was the result of the breakdown of *dharma*. The catastrophes of this age had made life feeble and short. Therefore, how was one to act in this age? The doctrine of *Kali Yuga* helped here. Dr. Ambedkar disclosed three features of this doctrine. Firstly, that the *Kali Yuga* began in 1177 B.C.E.<sup>292</sup> when Krishna died and it ended in 165 C.E.<sup>293</sup> with the defeat and destruction of the invading Greeks.<sup>294</sup> Secondly, that the period of Kali Yuga was

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<sup>289</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 275.

<sup>290</sup> Doniger. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. p. 38.

<sup>291</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was knowledgeable of the sophistication of myth. He does not discard a mythical narrative for the sake of being unhistorical. In fact a statement of his on *Manvantara* reveals his insight. He wrote 'it is not based on mythology and unlike the era it has no reference to any real to supposed history of Hindus'. This means that a mythological basis even if it was a supposed history was acceptable to Dr. Ambedkar.

<sup>292</sup> Dr. Ambedkar discusses the problem of two contending dates for the commencement of the Kali Yuga 3101 BC and 1177 BC. He viewed them as yet another insoluble riddle. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 291.

<sup>293</sup> Dr. Ambedkar also brings to fore the possibility of two dates marking the end of the Kali Yuga. The first possibility is 165 BC according to the texts from Mahabharata, and the second is 171 BC 'if we accept the statement that the Kali Yuga began in 1171 BC, and deduct one thousand years since then we cannot escape the conclusion that Kali Yuga should have ended by about 171 BC. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 292.

<sup>294</sup> About the beginning of the Kali Yuga Dr. Ambedkar wrote, 'according to *Aitereya Brahmana*, (Kali Yuga) began with *Nabhanedishta* son of *Vaivasvata Manu*. (Whereas) according to Puranas it began on the death of Krishna after the battle of Mahabharata. ... (Mr. Gopal Aiyer's) view is that the Mahabharata War commenced on 14<sup>th</sup> October and ended on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October 1194 BC. He places the death of Krishna 16 years after the close of the war basing his conclusion on the ground that Parikshit was sixteen when he was installed on the throne and reading it with the connected facts namely that the Pandavas went on Mahaprasthan immediately after installing Parikshit on the throne and this they did on very day Krishna died. This gives 1177 BC as the date of commencement of the Kali Yuga'. About the end of Kali Yuga Dr. Ambedkar cited the text from *Siddhanta*

extended by two hundred years by adding *Sandhya* and *Sandhyamsa* of a hundred years each before the commencement and after the completion of the Kali Yuga. The third, that the time of Kali Yuga was endlessly extended by innovating the idea of divine year, where one human year was equal to one divine day.<sup>295</sup> Dr. Ambedkar regarded this endless extension of *Kali Yuga* as an excessive exercise. In order to understand the concept of *Kali Yuga* he raised some pertinent questions. 'Why was Kali Yuga more demoralized than the preceding *yugas*? What was the moral condition of Aryans in the *yuga* or *yugas* preceding the present *Kali Yuga*?' Dr. Ambedkar found that there were social reforms carried out in the Aryan society and so there was evidence of progress and improvement in personal habits and social practices between the earlier and the later Aryans.

Anyone who compares the habits and social practices of the later Aryans with those of the ancient Aryans will find a tremendous improvement almost amounting to a social revolution in their manners and morals.<sup>296</sup>

Evidence of moral reforms caught Dr. Ambedkar's attention. These were specifically the efforts of two reformers, *Dirghatma* and *Shwetaketu*. Both of them reformed the rules of marriage. The first stopped the practice of polyandry in favour of monogamy. He also made rules to regulate *niyog* i.e. widow bearing and raising sons from other men for her dead husband or who was unable to bear sons. The second one made marriage indissoluble. Other social reforms were to standardize the prohibited degrees of consanguinity, prohibiting sexual relationship of the pupil with his guru's wife and control on gambling.<sup>297</sup> The basic point what Dr. Ambedkar wanted to highlight here was a noticeable progress, not decline, in moral standards of succeeding generations.

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where the great Indian Astronomer Gargacharya wrote about the Salisuka Maurya the fourth in succession from Ashoka. 'The most important words', as Dr. Ambedkar noted, 'are "after the destruction of the Greeks at the end of the Yuga". ... By Yuga he means Kali Yuga and the destruction and defeat of the Greeks took place about 165 BC. ... There are direct statements in chapter-188 and 190 of the Vanaparva of the Mahabharata that the Barbarian Sakas, Yavanas, Balhikas and many others will devastate Bharatvarsha 'at the end of the Kali Yuga'. The result which follows when the two statements are put together is that the Kali Yuga ended in 165 BC. (italics original) Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), pp. 291-292.

<sup>295</sup> Dr. Ambedkar noted that 'the Kali Yuga instead of remaining as before a period of 1,000 years was lengthened to a period of 1,200 years by the addition of Sandhya and Sandhayamsa. Secondly, a new innovation was made. It was declared that the period fixed for the Yugas was really a period of divine years and not human years. According to the Vedic Brahmins one divine day was equal to one human year so that the period of Kali Yuga, which was 1,000 years plus 200 years of Sandhya and Sandhayamsa i.e. 1,200 years in all became (1,200 multiplied by 360) equal to 4,32,000 years. In these two ways the Vedic Brahmins instead of declaring the end of Kali Yuga in 165 CE, as the astronomer has said extended its life to 4,32,000 years. No wonder Kali Yuga continues even today and will continue for lakhs of years. There is no end to the Kali Yuga.' Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 294.

<sup>296</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 294.

<sup>297</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 305.

It is not possible to divide this history into definite yugas and to say that what state of morals existed in the krita, and what in treta and what in dwapara yuga which closed at the death of Krishna. If however, we allow the ancient Aryans a spirit of progressive reform it is possible to say that the worst cases of immorality occurred in the earliest age i.e. The krita age, the less revolting in the treta and the least revolting in the dwapar and the best in the kali age.<sup>298</sup>

Indeed with the reforms underway before the advent of the *Kali Yuga*, this period could be regarded as the best among the three preceding eras!<sup>299</sup> Therefore, the imposed prolongation of the *Kali Yuga* according to Dr. Ambedkar was uncalled for. However what troubled him was the purpose of this doctrine, for it seemed to him that this was invented to suit the interest of the socially privileged to sustain the caste system.

Dr. Ambedkar found that ethics under the idea of prolonged *Kali Yuga* of the Age-of-Kali could explain the unexpected behaviour of the caste groups at times causing civil and social disorder. We shall presently see that what Dr. Ambedkar contended was also admitted by others. For instance Bharati admits that the 'rules of *dharma* are not static, absolute and permanent. They will change according to the need of the ages'.<sup>300</sup> Now Bharati's claim of a layman's perspective indicates that ordinary Hindus are aware of such provisions too.<sup>301</sup> Returning to Dr. Ambedkar's statement on the *Kali Yuga*, clearly the conditions prevailing in this age are such that life cannot be always regulated by ethics. It has to be suspended. This is what he writes,

What does Kali Yuga stand for? The *Kali Yuga* means an age of *adharma*, an age which is demoralized and an age in which the laws made by the King ought not to be obeyed.<sup>302</sup>

We can see in passing why Dr. Ambedkar was curious to know who that King Kali was of this exceptional age; curiously a sleeping king.<sup>303</sup> The conditions of the Age of Kali were described to be such that it was permitted for the people to refrain from undertaking actions which under normal conditions they are obliged to do. Lipner's suggestion implying 'that which is to be avoided (*varjya*) in Kali age' is helpful.<sup>304</sup> However, Dr. Ambedkar's discussion on this subject was an exercise of assessing its utility as a tenet of religion. It is in this line of reasoning that attention should be drawn to *Kali Varjya*, a dogma associated with *Kali Yuga* as Dr. Ambedkar describes

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<sup>298</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 304.

<sup>299</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 305.

<sup>300</sup> Bharati, *Understanding Hinduism*. pp. 29-30.

<sup>301</sup> Bharati, *Understanding Hinduism*., p. ix.

<sup>302</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 294.

<sup>303</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 317.

<sup>304</sup> Lipner. *Hindus*, p. 285.

it. It is schedule of customs and usages which people need not observe.<sup>305</sup> The implication of this is that in order to attain the purposes of *dharma*, the questionable means could be condoned on grounds that it was the Age of Kali.

### 3.3 Philosophy

With his knowledge of Hinduism that he had, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the philosophy of *Vedanta* on the one hand was related to the *Vedas* in a peculiar way and on the other it had radically parted ways with it. He noted that the fundamental difference was in the means of salvation. The distinction was that the *Vedic* exponents held sacrificial ritual as a valid means for salvation, whereas *Vedanta* exponents promoted knowledge. Dr. Ambedkar not only perceived this as a contrast between the approaches of *Vedas* and the *Vedanta*; but he also saw repugnance and antagonism between the proponents of these two approaches.<sup>306</sup>

That the Upanishads were excluded from the canonical literature of the *Vedas* is provided by the opposition of Upanishads to the views preached in the *Vedas* that the religious observances and sacrifices were the only means of salvation.<sup>307</sup>

He pointed this out in the very etymological derivation of the term Upanishad from *sad*, meaning 'to destroy'.<sup>308</sup> Dr. Ambedkar explained this as knowledge that destroyed ignorance and revealed the way of salvation in realizing *Brahma*.<sup>309</sup> Had this idea of the *Brahma* as the supreme self behind all passing forms gained a foothold in popular imagination, there might have been greater sense of mutual respect among the peoples of India.

However, there is a basic insight into what Dr. Ambedkar was attempting to highlight. He found that the distinction between ritualistic approach of *Jaimini* and knowledge-of-Self as expounded by *Badarayana* was irreconcilable. From the above it is obvious that these philosophical schools do not constitute the heart of Hinduism, for their exponents were at odds with each other. If this was so then Vedanta could not be the school that directed social behaviour and personal conduct of people in India.

## 4 Unveiling Reasons

Dr. Ambedkar, as we saw in the above section, found that the religious doctrines did not constitute the core of the Hindu faith. If this in his view was strange then

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<sup>305</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 318-322.

<sup>306</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. Pg.152.

<sup>307</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 153.

<sup>308</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 152.

<sup>309</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 152.

from another perspective this flexibility was Hinduism's strength also. His argument, however, that neither scripture nor doctrine nor philosophy provided the pivot to regulate personal behaviour of a Hindu I think is farfetched. Yet in an interview we come across a statement where it is said that Hinduism was based on the idea of Absolute Brahma.<sup>310</sup> It is well known that people do draw inspiration and lessons for personal behaviour from various characters of mythology. For instance, *Sita* sets example for a good wife, *Rama* for perseverance in sufferings, and *Hanuman* for devotion and self-control. But Dr. Ambedkar was convinced that Hindu society for all practical purpose was founded on the doctrine of inequality as propounded in *Manusmriti* or Manu's Law.<sup>311</sup> Therefore, he proceeded to explore that most important thing in Hinduism which directed the behaviour of its adherents? We can follow his search under two subheadings i.e. Manu's law and the *dharma*.

#### 4.1 Manu's Law

Besides studying the *Puranas*, which yielded similar results, Dr. Ambedkar also studied Manu's law – *Manusmriti*. This book, he emphasized, was written by Sumati Bhargava under the pseudo name of *Manu*. In the light of the recent estimates, if *Manusmriti* was written in 100 C.E., then Pushyamitra who had established a Brahmin rule in circa 185 B.C.E. could not have imposed it on his subjects.<sup>312</sup> However, Dr Ambedkar was drawing his conclusions on the dates as estimated by the historians in his times.<sup>313</sup> Dr. Ambedkar described the significance of *Manusmriti* as a treatise that explained what had to be done as one's duty in society. This, therefore, regulated one's ethical and social behaviour. Care should be taken in reading what Dr. Ambedkar writes and what he does not write of the Hindu ethics. If this is so then he would agree that Manu considered non-injury (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*) and control of senses (*indrya-nigraha*) as moral. But these could be done by even those who observed *sadharan-dharma* or ordinary duty of human beings. Dr. Ambedkar however was interested in the caste-cum-stage scheme of governance i.e. *varnashrama-dharma*.<sup>314</sup> These were, as we have said earlier, the proper duties associated with one's station of life i.e. station as determined by one's *varna* or caste and one's *ashrama* or specific stage of life.<sup>315</sup>

We should note that the *Manusmriti* was not merely a treatise on duties, but it also laid out penalties for offences. This observation was crucial for Dr. Ambedkar to

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<sup>310</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove Basis of 'Smriti Religion' (1935) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17.1. Mumbai: 2003, p. 236.

<sup>311</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove Basis of 'Smriti Religion' (1935), p. 236.

<sup>312</sup> Wendy Doniger. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking. 2009, p. 217.

<sup>313</sup> Dr Ambedkar had accepted that the *Manusmriti* was composed sometime between 170 BCE and 150 BCE and that Pushyamitra had overturned the Buddhist regime in C. 185 BCE. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Literature of Brahmanism' (1956) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 240 & 271.

<sup>314</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Morals of the House' (1946), p. 334.

<sup>315</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Morals of the House' (1946), p. 334.

analyze the nature of Manu's Laws and also of those stipulations laid down by Manu's successors like Baudhayana, in the other *smritis*.<sup>316</sup> He wanted the general readers to know that the system of penalty was based on the caste system and not on justice per se. This was so because the caste system was considered as the law of society divinely ordained, "*varnair lokarakshanasam vardhanartham*" i.e. in order to protect the world by means of the castes and to make it prosperous (*Manusmriti* 1, 31).<sup>317</sup> As it is not necessary to study the monotonous reproduction of *Manusmriti* texts in Dr. Ambedkar's articles, we can highlight his analysis in five points below.

1. The severity of penalty for offences increased with the descending order of castes.
2. The penalty was harsh when the marriage alliances regulated by caste rules were ignored.
3. The caste system was reinforced by extreme measures: on the one hand by excluding Dalits and on the other by offering advantages to the Brahmins.
4. The disarming of people by force of law, except the kshatriya or rulers was aimed to curb rebellion against those who enjoyed a social advantage by virtue of their caste.
5. The rearming of Brahmins to restore the order of caste system especially when a ruler disregarded the caste arrangement in society.

Not only did the Manu's laws direct people's behaviour but Dr. Ambedkar found that it constituted the foundation of the Indian society and culture. It was the social face of the Hindu *dharma*. As Manu had refused to go beyond the four castes he allotted an exterior position to those that could not be accommodated within the four. This he did by excluding them from the social stream altogether. Now while classifying various people in five categories seems conceptually possible,<sup>318</sup> still in practical terms, Dr. Ambedkar shows that it was subject to severe limitations.<sup>319</sup> We can list them as below such as,

1. That Manu's list of *sankar* resulting out of mixed marriages was too mechanical to accommodate the children of those parents who did not follow the rules of marriage according to the caste system.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Morals of the House' (1946), p. 365.

<sup>317</sup> *The Laws of Manu*. G. Bühler (tr.) Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886, p. 13.

<sup>318</sup> The result of this scheme was out of a threefold method which also is specified in the *Manusmriti*. These three categories were,

1. Progeny of different Aryan castes, namely *anuloma* and *pratiloma* constituting two Aryan categories.
2. Progeny of *anuloma* and *pratiloma* castes constituting one *sankar* (unacceptable) category.
3. Progeny of Non-Aryan and *anuloma* and *pratiloma* castes constituting two non-Aryan categories.

<sup>319</sup> The length to which he took details into considerations by drawing out endless schedules of possible combinations of inter-caste and intra-caste marriage alliances according to the threefold scheme needs appreciation

<sup>320</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 220.



2. That Manu's list of progeny resulting out of mixed marriages is incomplete,<sup>321</sup> for instance he fails to mention the *sankar* of brahman and *kshatriya*.<sup>322</sup>
3. That Manu's list of excluded groups resulting from mixed marriages is fictitious as these groups were neither heard of before nor ever after.<sup>323</sup>

Indeed here Dr. Ambedkar may have challenged the historicity of this social categorization but the fact is that the Indian masses were not prepared to disown their caste. He observed that 'every Hindu—if he is not merely a statutory Hindu believes in Caste and every Hindu—even one who prides himself on being a statutory Hindu—has a Caste.'<sup>324</sup> The conclusion of Dr. Ambedkar's finding was that Manu's categorization of society had made a very large section of society illegitimate and exceptions to his rules were left unresolved.

Manu has perverted history and defamed the most respectable and powerful tribes into bastards. This wholesale bastardization of huge communities Manu did not apply to the *vratyas*. But his successors carried the scheme further and bastardized the *vratyas* also. ...it is quite clear that some of the communities mentioned by Manu as being bastard in origin far from being bastard were independent in origin and yet Manu and the rest of the *smritikaras* call them, bastards. Why this madness on their part? Is there a method in their madness?<sup>325</sup>

With bitter sarcasm Dr. Ambedkar further wrote in the same section of the article,

What a reflection on the character of man and particularly of women. It is obvious that the unions of men and women must have been clandestine because prohibited by the rule of Chaturvarna. Such clandestine unions could take place only here and there. They could not have taken place on a wholesale scale. But unless one assumed a wholesale state of promiscuity how can one justify the origin of the *Chandals* or untouchables as given by Manu. The caste of *Chandala* is said by Manu to be the progeny of illegitimate intercourse between Shudra male and a Brahmin female. Can this be true? It means that Brahmin women must have been very lax in their morality and must have had special sexual attraction for the Shudra. This is unbelievable. So vast is the *Chandala* population that even if every Brahmin female was a mistress of a Shudra it could not account of the vast number of *Chandalas* in the country.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 220.

<sup>322</sup> Dr. Ambedkar illustrated this by the example of 'the case of *sankar* between Brahmin and Kshatriya. He does not mention the caste born out of the *sankar* between these two. Nor does he mention whether the *sankar* caste begotten of these two was a *pratiloma* or *anuloma*'. At this he mused 'why did Manu fail to deal with this question. Is it to be supposed that such a *sankar* did not occur in his time? Or was he afraid to mention it? If so, of whom was he afraid?' Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 220.

<sup>323</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 221.

<sup>324</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Morals of the House' (1946), p. 336.

<sup>325</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 224.

<sup>326</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 225.

Instead of resolving ambiguities of *varnashrama dharma*, Dr. Ambedkar unveiled the motives of Sumati Bhargava i.e. Manu, the law giver. In this scheme Manu had made escape from four *Varna* and four *Ashramas* impossible. Even if one were to condone castes and stages as providing social web for individual's security, yet the intention to protect a person from isolation at the cost of individual's liberty is difficult to defend. In his study on the *varnashrama dharma* what stands out is that neither any individual, nor any family or society was exempted from the prescription of Manu's law. The non-negotiable centre of Hinduism was *dharma* i.e. one's duty of caste and of stage. Preservation of *dharma* in accordance with this social order in Dr. Ambedkar's view was essential to a Hindu. On the basis of these observations Dr. Ambedkar argued that despite the variegated nature of Hinduism, one constant feature in its scriptures, doctrines and philosophy has been the *varna-dharma* or the caste system.

Is there then no principle in Hinduism which all Hindus no matter what their other differences are feel bound to render willing obedience? It seems to me there is and that principle is the principle of Caste.<sup>327</sup>

For Dr. Ambedkar *dharma* formed the unique and distinctive feature that determined the behaviour of his coreligionists, namely, they felt duty bound to protect the purity of their caste. But if this anxiety of maintain caste purity was a hurdle for making Hindus united and strong, then it had to be removed. Therefore, caste distinctions even in minute matters were necessary. It is understandable why in *Manusmriti* the prescriptive, proscriptive and penal laws were different for different castes. This *varna-dharma* or the caste system alone was upheld consistently in all Hindu tradition. For this he imputed Manu as one responsible for the intolerant and unfriendly behaviour of people. Now let us take up the subject of *dharma* from Dr. Ambedkar's perspective.

## 4.2 Dharma

Granted that *dharma* sets forth the role for an individual in family and society; but what Dr. Ambedkar pointed out was that *dharma* included much more. It was a complete scheme of social governance and standard of personal conduct. Although *dharma* did not place the demand to accept any definite belief, it demanded every individual to do his/her duties and obligations.<sup>328</sup> In this way it regulated personal behaviour within the parameters of caste and stage in the graded society.<sup>329</sup> Dr. Ambedkar maintained that *dharma* was the root of Hindu social order, particularly

<sup>327</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'The Morals of the House' (1946), p. 336.

<sup>328</sup> Gavin Flood. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.12

<sup>329</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. 'Their Wishes are Laws unto Us' (1938), p. 274. We may recall that "caste" and "stage" are English usages of *varna* and *ashrama*.

as propounded in the *Manusmriti*.<sup>330</sup> The strength of this lies in the fact that one's *dharma* was fixed by two things: by *varna* or the caste which fixes one's social status and by *ashrama* which fixes one's stage in life. Hence the term *varnashrama dharma* i.e. caste-cum-stage scheme, came to be coined. In as much as a person inherited caste from his/her parent; one is born in a *jati*. We need to remember this subtle difference when we deal with caste system. As this seems vague we will explore what this means in the following two sections, namely the Caste System and the *Ashrama* System. We must note the fact that both collective and personal behaviour is determined by these two systems.

#### 4.1.1 Caste System

In whatever way the caste system may be explained<sup>331</sup> it was of key importance for Dr. Ambedkar to distinguish Hinduism from other world religions.<sup>332</sup> He found that the social order<sup>333</sup> of Hinduism resulted in social stratification at unequal levels. In another way we can say that the caste system has been sustained by the practice of untouchability and social exclusion.<sup>334</sup> Indeed certain underpinnings even in *Manusmriti* which, in Lipner's words aimed 'to draw the sting out of the hereditary view of caste'<sup>335</sup> demonstrate its indispensability for the Hindu way of life. So the question before Dr. Ambedkar was this, how did caste system originate in India?

This probe led him to the *Vedas*. He found the oldest deposit of this idea in *Purushukta* in the Rig Veda where the caste system is said to have originated at creation in a cosmic sacrifice. He noted its omission in the Sam Veda with a degree of curiosity, but more interestingly we note his astonishment at other alternative explanations in the *Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas*.<sup>336</sup> Dr. Ambedkar's query was why had the exponents of scriptures taken note only of the Rig Veda text and ignored the alternative stories in other *Vedas*. This is what he wrote,

<sup>330</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove Basis of Smriti Religion' (1935), p. 236.

<sup>331</sup> The only difference that Dr. Ambedkar makes between Varna and Caste is that the first does not fix occupation by birth but the second does. For all practical purpose the meaning of the two terms is the same which entails ordering of society in to four levels in hierarchical manner.

<sup>332</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 189.

<sup>333</sup> Klostermair. *A Survey of Hinduism*. p. 47.

<sup>334</sup> Doniger. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. p. 17-40.

<sup>335</sup> Lipner. *Hindus*, p. 112.

<sup>336</sup> Dr. Ambedkar observed that the *Sama-Veda* neither included the *Purushukta* in this collection nor gave any explanation of the Caste. The next under consideration was the *Taitterriya Sanhita* of the 'black' *Yajur Veda*. According to it the Brahmin and the Kshatriya originated from *Vratya* [Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 191]. Whereas *Vajasaneya Sanhita* of the 'white' *Yajur Veda* holds that the four castes were created by the *Prajapati* [Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 191-192]. These texts do not endorse the claim of the divine origin of castes as propounded in the *Purushasukta*. The last in this section are the two citations from the *Atharva Veda*. The first citation suggests that the Brahmin is the first-born and has the power to liberate others<sup>336</sup> [Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-4. Mumbai: 1987, p. 192]. The other suggests that the whole human race descended from Manu. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 193.

Stopping for a moment to take stock so to say of the position it is quite clear that there is no unanimity among the *Vedas* on the origin of the four castes. None of the other *Vedas* agree with the Rig-Veda that the *Brahmin* was created from the mouth of the *Prajapati*, the *Kshatriyas* from his arms, the *Vaishyas* from his thighs and the *Shudras* from his feet.<sup>337</sup>

This quotation viewed that its exponents aimed to reinforce the hold of the Brahmins over the rest in society. Highlighting this, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out how people's behavior, both individually and collectively, of domination and of submission was to reinforce this social inequality continuously. Dr. Ambedkar argued that there were specific inbuilt features of caste systems that gave it a unique character; none like it existed in any other social system in the world. In particular he underlined three features. The first was the rule of graded-inequality.<sup>338</sup> The second was the rule of fixity-of-occupation. He found that Manu had fixed the occupational continuance of every person by his/her heredity. He instructed that '[i]n order to protect the universe the most resplendent one assigned separate (duties and) occupations, to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs and feet'.<sup>339</sup> The third was the rule of fixation-of-people. It meant that people were permanently fixed in their respective caste-groups. These three rules also explained the restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriages across caste lines. He accepted that there was no society without classes, but in the caste system there was something more.<sup>340</sup> It created isolated groups in such a manner that a permanent gap was retained between the forward and the depressed castes.

What a free social order aims to do is to prevent isolation and exclusiveness being regarded by all classes as an ideal to be followed. For so long as the classes do not practice isolation and exclusiveness they are only *non-social* in their relations towards one another. Isolation and exclusiveness make them *anti-social* and inimical towards one another. Isolation makes for rigidity of class consciousness, for institutionalizing social life and for the dominance of selfish ideals within the classes. Isolation makes life static, continues the separation into privileged and underprivileged, masters and servants.<sup>341</sup> (emphasis added)

This excerpt answers the question that was raised at the beginning of this chapter. Clearly Dr. Ambedkar, hard though he may sound, found that the *varna-dharma* or the caste system was the non-negotiable core of Hinduism. The impact that this *dharma* had on people was seen in how it made them behave in society both individually and collectively. Clearly those who perceived themselves having a

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<sup>337</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 193.

<sup>338</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order; Its Essential Principles' (1946), p. 106.

<sup>339</sup> *Manusmriti* I.87 and I.88-91.

<sup>340</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles' (1946), p. 113.

<sup>341</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order: Its Essential Principles' (1946), p. 113.

legitimate origin held an attitude of superiority and behaved condescendingly towards those who were perceived as low or an illegitimate origin.

#### 4.1.2 Ashram System

One should not miss the basic concern of individual liberty in Dr. Ambedkar's discussion on the ashram system. Each ashram is a stage in life, which prescribes one's duty in that stage. Dr. Ambedkar describes the ashram system in the following manner,

The varna *dharma* is a theory of the organization of society. The ashram *dharma* on the other hand is a theory of regulating the life of an individual. The ashram *dharma* divides the life of an individual into four stages 1. Brahmacharya. 2. Grahasthashrama 3. Vanaprastha and 4. Sannyas.<sup>342</sup>

With individual's liberty in view Dr. Ambedkar examined the ashram system in the light of the fact that *Manu* had prohibited bypassing any stage in between. In his analysis of the ashram system Dr. Ambedkar identified four conditions to which individuals were compelled to adhere:

1. Students were compelled to be celibates. i.e. *brahmacharya*.<sup>343</sup>
2. Young adults were compelled to marry. i.e. *grahastha*.<sup>344</sup>
3. Older adults were compelled to be recluse. i.e. *vanaprastha*.
4. Elders were compelled for renunciation. i.e. *sannyas*

Despite the impressive order of this system what puzzled Dr. Ambedkar was that the *Vasistha Dharma Sutra*<sup>345</sup> offered a person who had studied the *Vedas* liberty to enter any stage of his choice. Here Dr. Ambedkar instead of exploring its potentials for religious reform deflected attention by asking, 'so why these four ashram stages?' Indeed each stage regulated and controlled a person's behaviour according to the norms of each stage i.e. celibacy, family, hermit and an ascetic, but these regulations did not forbid those of the privileged caste to oppress a Dalit. Furthermore in Dr.

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<sup>342</sup> Dr. Ambedkar further explains the system of the four stages of life of the individual where 'the state of *Brahmacharya* has both *de jure* and *de facto* connotation in that it means an unmarried state of life. It's *de jure* connotation means the stage of study under a teacher. *Grahasthashram* is the stage of a house holder, a stage of a married family life. The stage of *Sannyas* is a stage of renunciation of civic rights and responsibilities. It is a stage of civic death. The stage of *Vanaprastha* is in between *Grahasthashram* and *Sannyas*. It is a stage in which one belongs to society but is bound to live away from society. As the name implies it prescribes dwelling in forest. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 205.

<sup>343</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 207.

<sup>344</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 208.

<sup>345</sup> Dr. Ambedkar quotes the following text of the *Vasistha Dharma Sutra* in his article: 'there are four order viz. (that of) the student, (that of) the householder, (that of) the hermit and (that of) the ascetic.' 'A man who has studied one, two or three Vedas without violating the rules of studentship, may enter any of these (orders) whichever he pleases.' Similarly he quotes the text of the *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, 'some declare that the (who has studied the Veda) may make his choice (which) among the orders (he is going to enter)' Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 207.

Ambedkar's view this caste-cum-stage system i.e. the *varn-ashrama dharma* met two objectives of life, the perishable and the imperishable. The *ashrams* guided a person in this perishable life through the earthly stages whereas the *varna* took one's imperishable self through the stages of transmigration.

Another reason offered by Dr. Ambedkar was that Manu made the *ashrama-dharma* compulsory to strengthen the *varna-dharma* or the caste system. If one respected caste, he/she would respect *ashrama* too and if one strictly adhered to *ashram* discipline, he/she would be careful of the caste order too. This discipline shaped one's behaviour as well as conduct. In a sense this in itself could be regarded as the strength of Hinduism. What Dr. Ambedkar refused to see was the basic insight of the *varnashrama dharma*, namely, discipline and order. Even if this system of *dharma* were to be dismantled, society would still need an alternative *scheme-of-divine-governance*. Keeping in view that Dalits were the worst affected in the caste system, an alternative to it was to be sought. I think that the alternative would be clearer if we made a distinction between the *religion-of-rules* and the *religion-of-principles*. In Dr. Ambedkar's understanding the *dharma* of Hindus was a form of the religion-of-rules and so he proposed an alternative *dharma* for Hindus which would be drawn up on the line of the religion-of-principles.

So the answer to the query which we had raised at the start of this chapter is this that in Dr. Ambedkar's view the social order, which the Hindu's aimed to create was the caste system. In his words it is 'a graded system of sovereignty, high and low'.<sup>346</sup> This *varna-dharma* or the system of caste was the hurdle for the great religion Hinduism. *Dharma* was a hurdle because it was unjust; it was unjust because it perpetuated inequality.

## 5 The Reforming Seeds Inherent in Hinduism

From what Dr. Ambedkar had experienced of Hinduism he was convinced that it needed to be put in harmony with the central concern of religion namely *utility* and *justice*. The religion-of-rules i.e. the Hindu *dharma* was too unequal and too rigid. But what he did not explicitly state comes to surface through his writings i.e. Hinduism within its traditions contains seeds of reform. Here ideas have their counters, doctrines have their alternatives and philosophies have their refuters. This vastness of Hinduism is due to its ancient roots. So we see how monism offsets polytheism, pure mediation opposes rampant idolatry, devotional equality goes up against caste hierarchy, the *Prajapati* myth contradicts the *Purushukta* myth, knowledge resists rituals and Shiva's sect combats Vishnu's. Dr. Ambedkar failed to engage with the obviously argumentative aspect of Hindu religion and philosophy. He paid little attention to the potential inherent in them for reforming Hinduism.

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<sup>346</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 72.

## 5.1 Clearing the Stage

Here we need to carefully discern the difference of what Dr. Ambedkar condemned in his religion and what he left untouched. It was the Brahmins i.e. priestly castes who he held responsible for misdirecting the religion from the track of justice. This was evident in the way they changed the status of scriptures sometimes as the paramount authority and at other times subservient.<sup>347</sup> Dr. Ambedkar's aim in this charge was to show the hegemony of the Brahmins on religion and the sacred literature. Their interest was to encourage what suited them and discourage what was inconvenient to them at that time. We may note Dr. Ambedkar's dismay at the scriptural sanction of the caste system which made people intolerant towards their coreligionists. This was chiefly due to their anxiety for maintaining their caste purity. But if this anxiety was a hurdle for making Hindus united and strong, then it had to be removed. Therefore, he took upon himself the project to deconstruct all that the priestly castes had erected i.e. its scriptures, worldview, caste system, cult and mythology. If Hinduism, therefore, was to be put back on the right track i.e. to be turned into a religion-of-principles for preserving society and protecting individuals then it needed to be thoroughly reconstructed. From what he wrote we can deduce what Dr. Ambedkar would have advised the Hindus to do,

1. To discard all that was detrimental to the interest of Dalits in the Hindu religion.
2. To delete from the Vedic corpus texts like the *Purushukta*.
3. To eliminate stories of controversial morality from religious literature.
4. To discard all superstitious and magical texts like the *Athar Veda* and *Tantrik*.
5. To abandon *Varnashrama Dharma* i.e. the caste-cum-stage system.
6. To abandon Manu's Laws i.e. *Manusmriti*.
7. To use alternative stories, doctrines and philosophy that did not reinforce the caste system.

These changes were not only basic for people to behave courteously and graciously but also clear the stage for reforming the religion. On this basis we can understand Dr. Ambedkar's proposed reconstruction of a new Hindu *dharma*.

## 5.2 Constructing the New Dharma

A radical change of understanding was needed for the *dharma*. It needed to be based on the religion-of-principles. This would entail dismantling the rule of the caste system by the principles of *utility* and *justice*. From all that we have discussed in the sections above we can now list what Dr. Ambedkar would undertake in this exercise.

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<sup>347</sup> This is what he argues in his book 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956).

1. He would reconstruct Hinduism as a pan-Indian cultural and democratic force acceptable to all people.
2. He would delete from the Vedic corpus the esoteric and casteist bias and retain the rest as a spiritual heritage.
3. He would make the four *ashrams* of life optional and open to all without discriminating any group.
4. He would make social justice and equality the bedrock for all future growth of religion and culture.
5. In this way Hinduism would become free of deities and would have become socially useful and just.
6. He would have accepted the humane and socially just values from other religions that are practiced in India in his scheme of religion.
7. He would wholly accept inter-dining and inter-marriage to bring greater egalitarianism.

Now we know the immense changes that Hindus are undergoing. This has not been due to religious reforms alone, but also due to democracy impinging on it with its equalizing force. Although the move for equality was set off with the right of adult franchise for all citizens, it was legislative acts for compensatory discrimination and land reforms that silently changed the social background.<sup>348</sup> It has offered the scheduled castes political advantages and economic privileges as never before. The point to be underscored is this that these laws were passed by the Legislative Assemblies of the Indian States and the Indian Parliament both largely comprising of Hindus of all types. However, Dr. Ambedkar did not live long enough to see these changes but in his times what he thought what Hinduism ought to be and what it ought to do for forging a just society has been summarized in the seven points above. In this line of thinking we may speculate a book titled “The Hindus and Their New Dharma” where he would have reconstructed Hinduism to operate on the values of compassion and kinship in order to forge a just society of equality, liberty and fraternity. Dr. Ambedkar was not altogether unimaginative about this possibility, which is another instance where we find seeds for reforming Hinduism within its own tradition. Here one might expect him to turn to the *Bhakti* tradition of Hinduism. After all he was brought up in this stream. As we saw earlier in chapter one, *Bhakti* had a sense of egalitarianism, but what Dr. Ambedkar proposed was philosophical.

### 5.3 Philosophy for the New Dharma

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<sup>348</sup> M.N. Srinivas. ‘On Living Revolution’ in *Collected Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 387.



Besides the well known school of the *Vedanta*, Dr. Ambedkar identified an alternative philosophical stream namely *Brahmaism*.<sup>349</sup> The essence of this he summarized into three points:

1. *Sarvam khalvidam brahma*—all this is brahma.
2. *Aham brahmasmi*—atmana (self) is the same as Brahma. Therefore I am Brahma.
3. *Tattvamasi*—atmana (self) is the same as Brahma. Therefore thou art also Brahma.

The uniqueness here was that he constructed the idea with the interest of Dalits in view. He identified it in the famous *mahavakyas* i.e great sayings as summing up its essence.<sup>350</sup> Despite the fact that both the positions regarded *atman* and *brahma* identical, the difference between the two was that *Brahmaism* regarded the world as real but Vedanta did not. For Dr. Ambedkar the belief in the reality of this world was foundational for the construction of any reasonable religious thought. Keeping to his stance that Hinduism had failed to take right turns at critical junctures of its evolution straying away from the foundational elements of a good religion, Dr. Ambedkar posed an alternative to the Brahmins. With the aim to forge a just and humane society they could authorize right shifts in religious doctrines. These could make life more contented and community more cohesive by turning people to become courteous and to respect each other's dignity.

## 6 Conclusion

AT THE END IT MUST BE ADMITTED that Dr. Ambedkar's response to Hindus, the tradition in which he was brought up, was ambiguous. We have seen how hard he was in his response to them; but at the same time he harboured a soft corner for them as well. Although he declared his intention to convert to another religion yet he did not leave its fold till the last year of his life. In 1936 with one stroke of his pen he revealed his thoughtfulness for Hindus. He wrote, "I feel I have some responsibility towards the future of Hindu culture and civilization".<sup>351</sup> It is clear that his disappointment with his co-religionists did not entirely wean him away from Hinduism. In his speech *Annihilation of Caste* he wrote to those who cared

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<sup>349</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 284.

<sup>350</sup> Dr. Ambedkar contrasted this with the dogma of *Vedanta* and presented the dogma of the later in three lines. I. *Brahma* is the only reality. II. The world is *Maya* and unreal. III. *Jiva* and *Brahma* are, i) according to one school identical, ii) according to another not identical but are element of him and not separate from him, and iii) according to the third school they are distinct and separate. After this Dr. Ambedkar summed up the dogma of *Brahmanism* also in a three line creed. I. Belief in *chaturvarna*. II. Sanctity and infallibility of the *Vedas*. III. Sacrifices to Gods the only way to salvation. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 285.

<sup>351</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Conversion Movements Sans Selfish Motive' (1936) idem *Writing and Speeches* Vol.17. Part-1. Mumbai, 2003, p. 253.

a very moving conclusion. His appeal to them was to pioneer reform on the egalitarian lines in Hindu society.<sup>352</sup>

You must make your efforts to uproot caste, if not in my way, then in your own way. I am sorry; I will not be with you. I have decided to change. ... But even when I am gone out of your fold, I will watch your movement with active sympathy and you will have my assistance for what it may be worth. Yours is a national cause. ... good bye and good wishes for your success.<sup>353</sup>

This gentle tone we come across for none except for Christians in his writings. He was aware of the progress that Hinduism had made over a long period of its evolution, *ahimsa* being one such example of which he was convinced. What he vehemently opposed was its consistent endorsement of the caste system, which had permanently fragmented the Hindu community into unequal segments. This had made the Hindus weaker whereas he wanted them to be modern and humane. The result of this unequally divided Hindu society was endless suffering of the Dalits—emotional and physical, economic and intellectual. Added to this was the atrocious untouchability practiced by people of the privileged castes against Dalits to ensure the protection of their purity. It is in this light that we need to assess Dr. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism.

It is clear from our discussion above that Dr. Ambedkar was convinced that the behaviour of people was determined by the social order. In turn the social order i.e. the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* was founded on religious worldviews—egalitarian or hierarchical. In the case of the Hindus, they were unfriendly to their co-religionists of scheduled castes. The reason for this behaviour was the unequal society which had been established on the system of caste. It gave rise to the practice of untouchability. This system was approved by the Hindu scripture and established by its *dharma*. The drawback in Dr. Ambedkar's critique was his failure to appreciate the inherent potential of Hinduism to reform itself. One needs to be alert to spot this potential as it kept cropping up throughout Dr. Ambedkar's writings. However, he seems to be unaware of this greatness of his religion.

Of what he had experienced Dr. Ambedkar had realized that at its best the Hindu *dharma* was beneficial only for few! Its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* was the *varnashrama dharma* i.e. caste-cum-stage scheme. In his view this had disenfranchised Dalits by denying them equality and freedom. The scheme was unjust. Consequently this made it unfit for Dalits. Despite his advice for reforming Hinduism, the scope for the restoration of *selfhood* of Dalits within it was bleak. Even

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<sup>352</sup> In this case it was the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal* was a social reform movement in Lahore against caste system that had invited Dr. Ambedkar to deliver a speech in its 1936 Annual Conference. However, after seeing the content of the speech, they developed cold feet and withdrew their invitation for Dr. Ambedkar to deliver this speech.

<sup>353</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 80.

the propagation of the new alternative *dharma* would take a very long time to permeate the consciousness of Hindus across India. The question now before Dr. Ambedkar was, if not Hinduism then what was the other option for Dalits?

## Chapter Five

### Response to Muslims

#### 1. Introduction

Dr. Ambedkar wrote more about Muslims than on Islam. This is understandable as he was interested in the social aspect of religion. Yet it is difficult from his writings to conclude<sup>354</sup> as Ahmed Akbar, a Cambridge scholar, does that Dr. Ambedkar seriously considered converting to Islam.<sup>355</sup> What we have is an exhaustive study on the proposal of Pakistan in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*.<sup>356</sup> In this Dr. Ambedkar had exhaustively reflected on the social makeup of the Indian Muslims,<sup>357</sup> which, for our purpose is a rich source to garner his insights. This study aims to explore Dr. Ambedkar's views about the Muslims. Undoubtedly Islam upholds justice but what sort of home did the Indian Muslim community offer to Dalits? Could it help them to regain their *selfhood*? But before we look into this aspect let us briefly survey its history.

#### 2. Islam: A Force to Reckon with

Dr. Ambedkar intellectually struggled to sort out his dilemma to understand Muslims. He reckoned the fact that Islam was a civilizing force for millions in Asia whose adherents were strict in their religious convictions. Now strictness in conviction and in behaviour was understandable but what was inexplicable for Dr. Ambedkar was this: why did the Muslims waive their adherence to egalitarianism in India? He pointed out that this had resulted in unequal treatment particularly of the Dalits converts within its fold. As a result they were neither wholly accepted into the community nor entirely excluded from it. In his response to Islam, although Dr. Ambedkar raised questions and issues highlighting this contradiction, he himself was unable to offer any satisfactory explanation to it. Yet this contradiction, it must be admitted, did not prevent millions to embrace Islam as a way of life in India. They embraced it voluntarily and willingly across the length and breadth of this country. In his view this fact had to be reckoned with seriously. But before we further discuss

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<sup>354</sup> This argument needs to be understood in the light of what Paradkar writes, 'After the 1935 Yeola resolution to quit Hinduism, Muslim leaders welcomed Ambedkar to join Islam. A rumor had once spread that Ambedkar was to join Islam. But Ambedkar denied this. Indian Muslims, he felt, did not take to social reorganization, and were therefore unlike the progressive Muslims under Kemal Pasha of Turkey'. B.A.M. Paradkar. *The Religious Quest of Ambedkar*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1972, p. 52

<sup>355</sup> S. Ahmed Akbar. *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 105.

<sup>356</sup> Dr. B.R Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 8. Mumbai: 1990, p. 7. This book is not theological in nature as such; rather it is downright political. It is actually a report of the Committee which under the Chairmanship of Dr. Ambedkar was appointed by the Independent Labour Party to study the question of Pakistan

<sup>357</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 5.

the Indian face of Islam let us look at its global background briefly which Dr. Ambedkar sketched in his response.

## 2.1 Its Stupendous Global Spread

The economic realities underlying the stupendous growth<sup>358</sup> and the spread of Islam, despite the meager support it received when Muhammad had first proclaimed it,<sup>359</sup> did not escape Dr. Ambedkar's attention.<sup>360</sup> His discussion reveals amazement at its extraordinary growth and spread in the world. Tracing the life-setting of the pre-Islamic Arabia he noted the presence of various tribes having polytheistic practices. The point in his study that it was not hard to convert pagans due to their tolerant nature to a new religion was in line with his own theory of religion which we have studied earlier in chapter two.<sup>361</sup> Efraim Karsh, professor and head of the Mediterranean Studies at King's College London University, makes a similar point about the pagan Arabs of the sixth and seventh centuries who were willing to accept any religion which in their estimation was fit.<sup>362</sup> Subsequently Islam gave such strength to the Arabs that they felt no further need to adopt another religion.

Dr. Ambedkar neither defended nor criticized the historical phase of Mohammed's rise as a prophet of a monotheistic religion. After the Prophet's death, arose his successors called the Caliphs. We shall return to them later. Mohammed's mercy to offer terms of peace to those defeated who agreed to accept Islam set an example for his successors for their future feats. Dr. Ambedkar noticed how within a matter of a hundred years Muslims had become a force in Asia and North Africa to reckon with.<sup>363</sup> Indeed the Byzantine officials in Egypt admiring the invading Arabs said, 'we have seen a people who love death more than life, and to whom this world holds not the slightest attraction'.<sup>364</sup> These words not only express their awe but their anxiety too.

Dr. Ambedkar would have disagreed with apologists like Aslan who viewed the spread of Islam to fill in a vacuum; instead he believed that there were economic reasons for this. Yet in the opinion of scholars like Efraim Karsh this spread was an imperialist expansion rather than necessitated by economic reasons.<sup>365</sup> However, instead of prolonging our discussion on these scholarly opinions, we will consider Dr. Ambedkar's views on the spread of Islam in its first hundred years. He assessed

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<sup>358</sup> Efraim Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism: A History*. London: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>359</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-12, 1993, p.32.

<sup>360</sup> Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism*, p 23.

<sup>361</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p.32.

<sup>362</sup> Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism*, p 10.

<sup>363</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p.35.

<sup>364</sup> Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism*, p. 23.

<sup>365</sup> Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism*, p 22.

that needs for sustenance, not religion, compelled the Arabs to migrate. Although this was already in progress in Arabia, religion he contended provided the vital cohesion and central power for it.<sup>366</sup> Not to say the least that the significance of Mecca in the pre-Islamic era lay in its role as a commercial centre<sup>367</sup> and Mohammed as a young man was acquainted with commerce and trade.<sup>368</sup> Dr. Ambedkar would agree to the reasonableness of the view that uprisings constitute the course of history when economic and political arrangements are disturbed. This point has been brought out in more recent scholarship by Efraim Karsh in his book *Islamic Imperialism*.<sup>369</sup>

For Dr. Ambedkar the subsequent rise of a multi-faceted Islamic world of Seljuks, Tartars and Mongols who superseded the Arabs was of greater political and economic significance. It dispelled the notion of the Muslim-world as monolithic, possessing a uniform agenda. Indeed one Muslim ruler could wage war against another. His pointer to the aggression of Seljuks on Mahamud, a Gaznavite King,<sup>370</sup> is a case in point. This grip of Islam on the non-Arabic people in Asia demonstrated plurality within the global community of Muslims. This plurality was not always harmonious. For instance, Dr. Ambedkar writes,

The Seljuks comprised of innumerable tribes or families, one of which was known as the Guzz. Among these constantly contending parities, the Guzz family, not in good graces of the rest, rose to power and became a menace to the neighbouring Mohomedan provinces. Under the leadership of Pigu Artsan Israil, they crossed the Oxus and spread over the Eastern provinces of Persia and having defeated Mahmud, the Gaznavite king in the battle of Mero in 1040, they proclaimed their independence.<sup>371</sup>

In a similar line of reasoning Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that for political prospects the Muslim rulers were not averse to make alliance with non-Muslims too, for instance the Seldjuk King, Sulaiman, accepted the invitation of Nacephorus Bryennius, the Asian, and a contender to the throne, against Nacephorus Botanciates of Europe. With the assistance of Sulaiman the former was brought and enthroned in Constantinople.<sup>372</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar described how the leadership of the Seljukians was taken by the Mongols, while at another place the Ottomans (Turks) were rising as a formidable power. Although they established an empire, their subjugation by the

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<sup>366</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915) Idem, p.35.

<sup>367</sup> William Montgomery Watt. *A Short History of Islam*. Oxford: Oneword, 2006, p.10.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid* William Montgomery Watt. 2006, p. 12.

<sup>369</sup> Karsh. *Islamic Imperialism*, p. 22.

<sup>370</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 37.

<sup>371</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 36.

<sup>372</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 37.

hands of Tamerlane from Asia was sudden. The Turks after centuries of struggle did finally conquer Constantinople on May 29, 1453. Why does Dr. Ambedkar cite this date? Perhaps he saw this as defining moment of Muslim ascendancy over the Christians. Yet the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks was not easy, the Arabs had tried it before but were disappointed so they turned to Europe via Gibraltar. Their successful advance into Europe till they were defeated at Tours by Charles Martel (the Hammer) in 732 C.E. is an example of diverse political approaches within the Muslim world albeit laced with economic interest.<sup>373</sup>

However, between Christian Europe and Muslim Asian-African regions there were tensions. Of course, Dr. Ambedkar again underscores economic reasons, rather than religious, underlying these political strains. Employing components of symbolic world he wrote that 'in this mighty struggle of the Crescent and the Cross commerce suffered immensely'.<sup>374</sup> Indeed from the picture of history that he draws in his essay *Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages* it seems that if Europe suffered from being cut off from Indian and eastern trades due to the spread of the Muslim world in western and central Asia, India gained new opportunities to trade with the Muslim world. For commercial reasons it became ultimately necessary for the Europeans to discover alternative routes to reach other parts of the globe bypassing the impenetrable screen of the Muslim world that had stretched itself between the far East and Europe. Within this economic frame of interpretation Dr. Ambedkar developed his line of reasoning of the colonial expansion of the Europeans which includes the colonial history of India too.

## 2.2 A Solid Oak in India

Within a hundred year of the rise of Islam, Muslims knocked at the door of Raja Dahir, a king of Sindh. But before judging the historical turns and twists it should be understood that Dr. Ambedkar while tracing the history of the Muslim enterprise in India, steered clear both of the Hindu propagandists who blame the Muslim invasion as unfair and of the Muslim propagandists who considered the pre-Islamic era as uncivilized i.e. *jahiliyyah*—the Time of Ignorance.<sup>375</sup> His line of reasoning was not communalistic. It is, therefore, understandable why Dr. Ambedkar underscored the point that Muslim invasions were not for the lust of loot and subjugation;<sup>376</sup> rather the first invasion of Mahommad bin Qasim in 711 C.E. was a small one to chastise Raja Dahir who had refused to compensate for the abduction of an Arab ship at Debul, a seaport town of Sindh.<sup>377</sup> We are, therefore,

<sup>373</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p.42.

<sup>374</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 50.

<sup>375</sup> Aslan Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>376</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 55.

<sup>377</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 55.

left to speculate how history would have shaped if instead of seizing this ship, Raja Dahir would have attempted to forge greater ties for trade with west Asia, yet on the other hand one is not told what circumstances compelled him to impound the vessel. For Dr. Ambedkar the chances lost and the opportunities gained were inevitable as history progressed. It was in this light that he saw how having an opportunity to strike once, the concern to spread, what Mahommad bin Quasim perhaps considered as a civilized standard for a nation, namely Islam, became a mission which he relentlessly undertook among the Hindu populace of Debul. In Dr. Ambedkar's view the excess in such missions subsequently undertaken by Muhammad Ghazni and others till the time of Aurangzeb was not to be regarded as caprice and moral perversion;<sup>378</sup> rather he reasoned that these events now regarded as excesses were normal in any political upheaval of those times.<sup>379</sup> Yet there was something positive that happened in the course of its history in India. This is how he described it,

The Muslim invaders ... did a positive act, namely, to plant the seed of Islam. The growth of this plant is remarkable. It is not a summer sapling. It is as great and as strong as an oak. Its growth is the thickest in Northern India.<sup>380</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar wanted to highlight significant cultural changes that the spread of Islam brought in India.<sup>381</sup> His aim was to point out the profound and irreversible alteration in the character of the region resulting from the breaking of the Aryan homeland, the eclipse of Buddhism and the establishment of Islam in India.<sup>382</sup> This is how Dr. Ambedkar describes the fragmentation of northern India,

The first consequence of these invasions was the breaking up of the unity of northern India with the rest of India. After his conquest of northern India, Muhammad Ghazni detached it from India and ruled it from Ghazni. When Mahommed Ghorî came in the field as a conqueror, he again attached it to India, and ruled it from Lahore and then from Delhi. Hakim, the brother of Akbar, detached Kabul and Kandahar from northern India. Akbar again attached it to northern India. They were detached by Nadirshah in 1738 ... Northern India, therefore, has been like a wagon in a train, which can be coupled or uncoupled according to the circumstances of the moment. If an analogy is wanted, the case of Alsace-Lorraine could be cited. Alsace-Lorraine was originally part of Germany, like the rest of Switzerland and the Low Countries. It continued to be so till 1680, when it was taken by France and incorporated in to French territory. It belonged to France till 1871, when it was detached by Germany and made a part of her territory. In 1918, it was again detached from Germany and

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<sup>378</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 62.

<sup>379</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 57.

<sup>380</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 65.

<sup>381</sup> Reza. *No god but God*, p. 79.

<sup>382</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 63.



made part of France. In 1940, it was detached from France and made part of Germany.<sup>383</sup>

Alsace-Lorraine remained so till 1945. With this example in view Dr. Ambedkar turned his attention to the Indian situation in his times. Keeping aside the disputes that arose on and off from the territorial uncoupling of northern regions of India, Dr. Ambedkar underscored the permanency of Islam in India, which was manifested in the astonishing numerical growth of Muslims and establishment of their religio-cultural institutions and political associations across the country. Indeed a significant number of Dalits had embraced Islam. This showed that despite historical upheavals, Islam was there to stay making a deep impact on Indian society and culture. Having said that it must also be admitted that Dr. Ambedkar would agree with our contemporary scholars like Susan Bayly of Christ's College Cambridge, that the implanting of Islam, as in other places, on the Indian soil could never be merely a one-way process.<sup>384</sup> It was surely to emulate elements from the Indian social environment that would create a distinct Indian Muslim community. To this we shall turn later in our discussion. But whether Dr. Ambedkar would readily agree to consider a religion, notwithstanding its place of origin, to be Indian if it were accepted by the people of India is one thing that we shall never entirely know.

### 3. Dream to be a World Community

In the nineteenth century the Indian Muslims for religious reasons wanted to support and protect the *Khalifa*<sup>385</sup> in Turkey. Dr. Ambedkar noted two Islamic

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<sup>383</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 64.

<sup>384</sup> This is what Susan Bayly observed about Tamil Muslim mystics in South India, 'In formal Hinduism this world of dangerous uncontained forces is the resort of the divine in its most awesome and terrifying. More specifically it is a Savite world, a place of shakti divinities and of Lord Shiva as the terrible Lord Bhairava, the hideous ascetic with his matted hair and shrunken skeletal body smeared with ash from the cremation ground. Given the power of these motifs in south Indian society, it should come as no surprise to find that the region's tazkira literature contains a large body of clearly identifiable Saivite imagery. These Saivite themes are usually at their most explicit in accounts of the miraculous exploits which the pir performs in the course of his travels through the wilderness. in the Pomegranate volume for example, the saint and his disciples are lost in wild forest country and at the point of death from thirst and hunger. Incidents of this kind appear regularly in Indian Sufi biographies; the saint conjures up food and drink, the party is saved and thus the story shows the saint's disciples how they too may be sustained by the grace which flows from the saint's miraculous barakat. In these Tamil texts the story allows for a sustained interweaving of Hindu and Muslim Sufi motifs.' Cf. Susan Bayly. *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 120.

<sup>385</sup> Prophet Muhammad's successor in Arabic was called *Khilafat Rasul Allah*. After the Prophet's death the first four *Khalifa* or Caliphs were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali-ibn-Talib. The last one was Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. They were Arabs of Quraysh Tribe. The successive Caliphs were neither required to be religious authorities nor were to be political rulers; rather as titular head of Muslim State they were there to protect Islam from aggression or authorize war. Yet Caliph is not a ruler like *Sultan*. Under a Caliphate there could be many Sultans. Ali, the fourth Caliph who died in 661 C.E. and Mu'awiyah his successor launched the *Umayyad dynasty* of prince-Caliphs who ruled from Damascus. After Iraq got Islamized, Caliphate was shifted to Baghdad. Sometime after 750 C.E. the Umayyad dynasty was replaced by *Abbasids* another Arab tribe as Caliphs, though Spain never accepted them. Over subsequent centuries following the sack of Baghdad by Mongols, Caliphate was reduced to a cultural ornament. It eclipsed except in the imagination of the people, till Beibars, a Mamluk Sultan of Egypt invited a man of Abbasid family from Syria to take this Office. This Caliph was slain as he approached Baghdad by the Mongol governor. In his place another Caliph was enthroned in Egypt by the

movements towards this end, namely, Pan-Islamism and the *Khilafat* Movement. In the following two sections we will take these up to understand the power of organized movement that even Gandhi could not ignore.

### 3.1 Pan-Islamism

*Pan-Islamism* was in vogue in the years before the Independence and the Partition of India when Dr. Ambedkar was producing his most thoughtful reflections. Tracing its sources in Turkey in the mid nineteenth century, Aslan, a modern American Muslim apologist, explains *Pan-Islamism* as a religio-political movement of enthusiasts calling themselves Young Ottomans who were inspired by al-Afghan<sup>386</sup> and Namik Kemal (1840-88), a poet and playwright, aiming to constitute 'Muslim unity across cultural, sectarian and national boundaries under the banner of a single, centralized (and obviously Turkish) Caliphate—in other words, the revival of *Ummah*'.<sup>387</sup> Indian Muslims were also attracted to these ideas. Dr. Ambedkar would well agree that pan-Islamism though aimed to enhance the morale of Muslims was of no advantage to Dalits. The reason for this was that he had identified Islam's success to bond diverse sections of its worldwide followers, yet this privilege was not extended to those outside the orbit of Islamic fraternity. Therefore, in line with his understanding of religion as *just* and *useful*, Dr. Ambedkar was perhaps looking for one that would be fair enough not only to shelter the Dalits within its fold with dignity but also be useful for those among their ranks who would choose not to join it.

### 3.2 Khilafat

The *Khilafat* movement is a very interesting area of history which unveils the prevailing mood of Indian Muslims in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Gandhi was quick to note its emotional impact on the Indian Muslims and saw its usefulness for forging a Hindu-Muslims front against the British rule. He did this by lending his support to the Ali brothers who were leading this Movement in India. Being of no major historical consequence to the Europeans, discussion on *Khilafat* is given a minimal space in their books. Therefore, an outline of its history has to be included here.

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Beibars. *Mutawakkil* was the last Caliph in this succession. Under Abdul Hamid-I an Ottoman Sultan the Caliphate was revived. He noted the authority that Empress Catharine-II of Russia exercised as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church over the Orthodox Christians in Turkey. Drawing parallels between the Caliphate and Papacy, Abdul Hamid adopted the title Caliph and claimed jurisdiction over Muslims in Russia. Not surprisingly this claim was recognized by Russia by a treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji in 1744. Curiously Sultan and Caliph was now the same person. (Read Reza. *No god but God* p. 113 and Laurence E Browne. *The Prospects of Islam*. London: SCM Press 1944, p. 26).

<sup>386</sup> Originally from Iran, 17-year old al-Afghan came to India in 1856 for education at Aligarh. A Shiite, he posed as a Sunni to find greater acceptability for his ideas.

<sup>387</sup> Reza. *No god but God*, p. 231.

The situation took an adverse turn in World War-I when Turkey sided with Germany. The call of the Sultan, in capacity of Caliph, for the Muslim *ummah* worldwide to a *Jihad* against the infidel Allies alarmed the British.<sup>388</sup> Although the Indian Muslims paid no heed to it then, curiously on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1919<sup>389</sup> after the War, the Ali Brothers started the *Khilafat* Movement to preserve the Turkish Caliphate.<sup>390</sup> Interestingly, as Browne comments that, 'it was in India and India alone that a movement was started to try to save the Caliphate'.<sup>391</sup> The aim of *Khilafat* Movement was to compel the British to protect the Caliph.<sup>392</sup> The background to this cannot be understood apart from Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) visionary soldier and the founder of modern Turkey. In May 1919, Mustafa Kemal began a nationalist movement from Anatolia. Unhappy with the imposed peace settlement on Turkey by the victorious Allies, he started an opposition against it which became strong after his victory over the Greeks in 1921. His vision caught the imagination of the Turkish people who succeeded in abolishing the Caliphate on 3 March 1924 and the transfer of its powers to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. This marked the emergence of Turkey as a secular republic with Mustafa Kemal as its president. The Muslim nations debated the validity of Turkey's unilateral decision to abolish the Caliphate in 1924. On May 1926 a "Caliphate Conference" was convened in Cairo to consider this matter. Declaring Caliphate as a requirement in Islam it resolved to re-establish it. This decision was never implemented. Meanwhile the Caliph in exile in Europe was supported by an annual pension of £ 3,600 by the Nizam of Hyderabad, who interestingly had never supported the *Khilafatists*.

In India, the Muslims on the one hand opposed the British involvement in Turkey, and on the other supported those who were advocating the restoration of the Caliphate which was famously called the *Khilafat Movement* in India. Fearing the return of Sultan in religious guise, the Turks refused to accept the re-establishment of the Caliphate and perceived its advocacy as interference in its internal matters. Seeing the anti-Caliphate attitude of Turkish Muslims and the weak position of those advocating its continuance, the Indian Muslims lost interest in the *Khilafat Movement*. Unconcerned with the Indian scene Mustafa Kemal continued to push his agenda of the modernization of Turkey. This included the emancipation of women, the abolition of all Islamic institutions and the introduction of Western legal codes, dress, calendar and alphabet, replacing the Arabic script with the Latin one. He pursued a policy non-alignment in international affairs and succeeded to establish amicable relations with Turkey's neighbours. In 1935 he was given the name

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<sup>388</sup> Browne. *The Prospects of Islam*, p. 23.

<sup>389</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 148.

<sup>390</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 151.

<sup>391</sup> Browne. *The Prospects of Islam*, p. 40.

<sup>392</sup> Jacob M. Landau. *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 211.

Atatürk, meaning 'Father of the Turks'. However what may be closer to truth in Browne's observation was that the nations nearer Constantinople who had experienced the iron hand of Caliphs quietly preferred its abolition.<sup>393</sup>

With this background we should note Dr. Ambedkar's inquiry of Gandhi's involvement in *All India Khilafat Conference*. Clearly Dr. Ambedkar disapproved Gandhi's involvement in extra-territorial religious affairs of Muslims while neglecting the interests of the Dalits in India.<sup>394</sup> In his view to support this project was to ignore the signs of time. This is what he wrote,

The *Khilafat* could not be saved simply because the Turks, in whose interest this agitation was carried on, did not want the Sultan. They wanted a republic, and it was quite unjustifiable to compel the Turks to keep Turkey a Monarchy when they wanted to convert it into a republic. It was not open to insist upon the integrity of the Turkish Empire because it meant perpetual subjection of the different nationalities to the Turkish rule and particularly of the Arabs, especially when it was agreed on all hands that the doctrine of self-determination should be made the basis of the peace settlement.<sup>395</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar perceived that the *Khilafat* Movement on the one hand lacked sound base<sup>396</sup> and on the other Gandhi's unflinching support to it rather odd.<sup>397</sup> This was more so in view of the fact that *Ahimsa* and *Swaraj*<sup>398</sup> which were original to Gandhi were ignored by the *Khilafatists* who obviously were controlled by the ideals of Pan-Islam. Another thing that Dr. Ambedkar brought to the fore was that non-cooperation was not Gandhi's innovation; instead it was *Khilafatists'* method to coerce the British in India. What comes out of Dr. Ambedkar's discussion is that the *Khilafat* in India, even with misplaced priority, was such an organized, cohesive and motivated Movement among the Muslims that the Congress party had to reckon with it.

#### 4 Dream to be a Nation

Muslims under the British rule dreamed and desired for the creation of Pakistan. Despite its legitimacy, Dr. Ambedkar saw that there were set-backs for Dalits in this proposal. But before we draw our attention to these, let us first study his views on

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<sup>393</sup> Browne. *The Prospects of Islam*, p. 40.

<sup>394</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress And Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables' (1945) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-9., Mumbai: 1990, p. 252.

<sup>395</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p.146-7.

<sup>396</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 147.

<sup>397</sup> Gandhi did three things to support *Khilafat* Movement in India: one, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1920 he gave a notice for commencing non-cooperation from 1<sup>st</sup> August to the British Viceroy in India; two, he returned his medal which the British had awarded him<sup>397</sup> and three, he undertook a nationwide tour from August 1<sup>st</sup> to September 1<sup>st</sup> 1920 to persuade people to undertake Non-cooperation against the British. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 151.

<sup>398</sup> Non-violence and Home Rule.

what constitutes a nation. For him the yearning for Pakistan by the Indian Muslims was 'a nation calling for a home'. This is what he wrote,

The Muslims have developed a "will to live as a nation". For them nature has found a territory which they can occupy and make it a state as well as a cultural home for the new-born Muslim nation. Given these favourable conditions, there should be no wonder, if the Muslims say that they are not content to occupy the position which the French choose to occupy in Canada or the English choose to occupy in South Africa, and that they shall have a national home which they can call their own.<sup>399</sup>

For this reason Dr. Ambedkar refused to impute Muslims for creating Pakistan; rather he held that the Hindus equally were responsible for it. He took cognizance of Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) the leader of the all India Muslim League since 1913 and subsequently the founder of Pakistan in 1947. What he wrote was this,

The view that seems to guide Mr. Jinnah is that Indians are only a people and that they can never be a nation. This follows the line of British writers who make it a point of speaking of Indians as the people of India and avoid speaking of the Indian nation. Granted Indians are not a nation, that they are only a people. What of that? History records that before the rise of nations as great corporate personalities, there were only peoples. There is nothing to be ashamed if Indians are no more than a people. Nor is there any cause for despair that the people of India—if they wish—will not become one nation.<sup>400</sup>

From the above excerpts it is clear that in Dr. Ambedkar's view a nation is preceded by the existence of people who later evolved into communities. He argued that such communities formed a larger society held together by political and economic interest. In the above discussion it is very interesting to underscore Dr. Ambedkar's insight of what forms a nation. Clearly he attributed the common *will* of a people to live together despite their religious, cultural, lingual and ideological diversities as a primary requirement to constitute a nation. When this *will* comes into play, it becomes possible for a nation to be born.

Be this as it may, the fundamental point in Dr. Ambedkar's reasoning was to explain the aspiration for Pakistan as a part of any historico-political progress when the consciousness of a community was raised to become a nation. And so the distinction between a community and a nation was crucial for him. Within this frame he considered the existence of a series of communities as well as a series of nations within a territory as legitimate. Attention should be drawn to the way Dr. Ambedkar identified the distinct consciousness of the two, chiefly by the way the people were allowed to behave. He explains this as, 'The people allow a community

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<sup>399</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 39.

<sup>400</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 353.

only the right of insurrection whereas to a nation they concede the right of disruption'.<sup>401</sup> What we see here is Dr. Ambedkar's aim to rationally explain the carving out of Pakistan in the north-western States of British-India as an independent nation. Dr. Ambedkar underscored that in a situation of crisis a community seeks only safeguards whereas a nation demands separation because in his reckoning the ultimate destiny sought by a community is entirely different from a nation. This contradistinction also helps to understand the difference that Dr. Ambedkar made between nationality and nationalism. He used the term nationality not in the sense of a person's identity on a passport; rather for him these two though related were distinct psychological states of mind.<sup>402</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was aware that nationality would only flame into nationalism if a community resolved or *willed* to live as a nation especially when a geographical location to establish a State and its culture was possible.<sup>403</sup> That is why he argued that the demand for Pakistan indicated an inevitable phase and irreversible turn in the evolution of the Indian Muslim community under British rule. Dr. Ambedkar describes this flamed feeling of nationalism in a most remarkable way. Touching chords of interior mystery, this is how he expresses it,

[T]he Muslims were influenced by some mysterious feeling, the source of which they could not define and guided by a hidden hand which they could not see but which was all the time directing them to keep apart from Hindus. This mysterious feeling and this hidden hand was no other than their pre-appointed destiny, symbolized by Pakistan, which, unknown to them was working within them.<sup>404</sup>

One may take the liberty to articulate Dr. Ambedkar's position in a line: if this 'mysterious feeling' was not adequately rational, it was not unreasonable either. The feeling of becoming a nation in the given circumstances for the Indian Muslims was natural. He reasoned that a community stripped of its power, threatened with redundancy and humiliated with the possibility of being ruled by its former subjects, desperately needed to take measures to protect its communal dignity. In this line of reasoning he drew attention to the fact that 'every change, executive, administrative or legal introduced by the British (had) inflicted a series of blow upon the Muslim community'.<sup>405</sup> In 1837 Persian was replaced by English as the language of the Law and administration, the *Quazis* were replaced by Officers and Judges who could be of any religion yet had the power to execute Muslim law.<sup>406</sup> The gradual replacement of Muslim criminal law by Macaulay's penal code which was formally adopted in

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<sup>401</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 326.

<sup>402</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p.38-39.

<sup>403</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 39.

<sup>404</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 338.

<sup>405</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 48.

<sup>406</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 49.

1860 was another blow.<sup>407</sup> All these, he pointed out, were serious setbacks for Muslims.<sup>408</sup> This is what he wrote,

[T]he Muslims found their prestige gone, their laws replaced, their language shelved and their education shorn of its monetary values. Along these came more palpable blows in the shape of annexation of Sind and Oudh and the Mutiny. The last, particularly affected the higher classes of Muslims, who suffered enormously by the extensive confiscation of property inflicted upon them by the British, as a punishment of their suspected complicity in the Mutiny. By the end ... the Musalmans, high and low, were brought down ... to the lowest depths of broken people, black despair and general penury. Without prestige, without education and without resources, the Muslims were left to face the Hindus.<sup>409</sup>

In the light of what Dr. Ambedkar says the revulsion of the idea of being ruled by Hindus who once were their subjects becomes understandable. He wrote, 'The Muslims and other minorities have taken a definite stand. They are not prepared to accept the position of subject races.'<sup>410</sup> On the one hand the demand for Pakistan addressed socio-political and psychological need of Indian Muslims, on the other the Hindus were keen to keep India united.<sup>411</sup> If Hindu-Muslim unity was crucial to Gandhi, Indo-Pak partition was to Jinnah. At last two independent nations were born in August 1947, Pakistan and India. For Dalits, however, there was neither anything to contribute nor anything to gain in this push for Hindu-Muslim unity and pull for Indo-Pak partition.

Another thing that Dr. Ambedkar brought to the fore was the loss that Dalit community had to face arising out of the Muslim demand for Pakistan. They had lost a political collaborator. This is how he described it,

The Muslim League alignment is simple. It is an alignment of Muslim against all other Non-Muslim without distinction or discrimination. This change in the attitude

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<sup>407</sup> Zareer Masani. *Macaulay, Pioneer of India's Modernization*. Noida: Random House India, 2012, p. 139.

<sup>408</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 48.

<sup>409</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 49.

<sup>410</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 46.

<sup>411</sup> Dr. Ambedkar, however, was previewing the situation in pre-independence times where he was closer to the forthcoming event of Pakistan. He could see before him the Muslim masses drifting along with their leaders for the demand of Pakistan. This drift though emotional was not a small one; rather it was a great 'ideological transformation' which could not be attributed to any dishonesty. He was able to see from his position at that time then that the magnetism of Pakistan—the new destiny, as he described it, compelled the Muslim masses to be drawn towards it. Granted this development in the Muslim community to become a nation was natural, but was there a distinct perception of being a Muslim nation? The answer is yes. In their establishment of Pakistan the ideological face of Muslims in India reached its logical climax, after this those who remained in India seek no more than to be a community among the rest. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 331.

of the League cannot but have serious consequences for the Untouchables. It means that the Untouchables have lost an ally.<sup>412</sup>

But later he was dismayed with the reports he had received in 1947 of the treatment the Dalits had received in Pakistan and Hyderabad. In the face of imposed restriction of their migration to India and forcible conversion to Islam, he advised the Scheduled Castes to cross over to the Indian Territory. Similarly he condemned those who were enforcing conversions especially *Ittelhad-ul-Muslimeen's* who were violently targeting Dalits in the Hyderabad State of the Nizam in India.<sup>413</sup> As a spirited nationalist he wrote that 'whatever the tyranny and oppression which the Hindus practice on us, it must not wrap our vision and swerve us from our duty (to serve the nation)' .<sup>414</sup> His comments that 'while in Pakistan they (Scheduled Castes) were subject to forcible religious conversion, in Hindustan they are subject to forcible political conversion' indicate deep disappointment.<sup>415</sup>

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, the Muslim League did not hold social issues as genuinely valid for their political engagement.<sup>416</sup> Economic progress, fostering peace and strengthening democracy was not on their political agenda; instead the League's anxiety was to protect the communal interest of their community. Considering the League's position from this perspective, Dr. Ambedkar argued that their predominant occupation was not democracy; but how democracy, in which all will have an equal share, would affect their interest. He held this sort of mindset responsible for the social stagnation of Muslim community in India.

## 5. Strange Bedfellows

One thing that attracted Dr. Ambedkar's attention to the Abrahamic religions was their value of social equality. Islam, which followed Judaism and Christianity was one such. But what left him nonplussed were those Indian Muslims who failed to treat their coreligionists equally. Besides this he also was unable to square the practice of exclusion and acquiescence for war along with the ideals of kinship and peace in their religious tradition. Let us now turn our attention to these three themes—equality, kinship and peace in Islam, and to Dr. Ambedkar's response to these in the Indian context.

### 5.1 Treating equals as unequal

As such Islam is an egalitarian religion and Dr. Ambedkar does not deal with the difficulty of untouchability and segregation of Dalit-Muslims as such. Only in

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<sup>412</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'If Democracy Dies...' (1942) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-III., 2003, p. 255.

<sup>413</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Scheduled Castes In Pakistan Should Come Over To India' (1947) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-I, 2005, p. 366. This violence was aimed to dissuade the Scheduled Castes from joining movements for establishing responsible government or those who were supporting Hyderabad for joining the Indian Union.

<sup>414</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Scheduled Castes In Pakistan Should Come Over To India' (1947), p. 368.

<sup>415</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Scheduled Castes In Pakistan Should Come Over To India' (1947), p. 367.

<sup>416</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 236.



one place in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India* did he explicitly state this as a problem. Otherwise he carefully projected the Scheduled Castes on par with other minorities.<sup>417</sup> He did this deliberately to argue his case for securing separate electorate and proportionate distribution of seats in legislature for the Scheduled Castes. We may recall that this was a privilege that minorities enjoyed under the British rule in India.

While assessing the cause for social stagnation of Indian Muslims he highlighted the unequal treatment of some Indian Muslims. He pointed out that according to the Islamic tradition their coreligionists should have treated them as equal members of the *ummah* i.e. the worldwide Muslim community. He contended that the Muslims of the subcontinent had a caste-like system.

Take the caste system. Islam speaks of brotherhood. Everybody infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. Regarding slavery nothing needs to be said, it stands abolished now by the law. ...But if slavery has gone, caste among Musalmans has remained.<sup>418</sup>

The result of this was the continuation of discrimination against the Dalit-Muslims. Interestingly Dr. Ambedkar found this out from Census Records of 1901 of Bengal. Attention should be drawn to his basic point that the three social divisions in the Muslim society – (1) *Ashraf*, (2) *Ajlaf* and (3) *Arzal* were indicative of its unequally fragmented society.<sup>419</sup> These three social segments like castes functioned in a descending order of social importance tied with specific occupation. In matters pertaining to inter-marriage and inter-dining they were in no terms with those at the lowest level. The *ashraf* comprised the highest class of nobles and landowners often tracing their origins to central Asia. The *ajlaf* were the second level of service class like cultivators, tailors and barbers. The *arzal* did the dirtiest jobs. They were the eunuchs, butchers and sweepers. Indeed Dr. Ambedkar did not hesitate to write that,

There can thus be no manner of doubt that the Muslim Society in India is afflicted by the same social evils as afflicted the Hindu Society.<sup>420</sup>

In his view the hope of Dalits for reclaiming *selfhood* in Islam looked bleak. Although the line of social segregation of Muslims was not as strict as of Hindus, those who

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<sup>417</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Provincial Legislature' (1929) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-2., 2005, p. 357.

<sup>418</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 228.

<sup>419</sup> The conventional social divisions of Sheikh, Saiad, Moghul and Pathan were of no consequence in Bengal; instead the *Ashraf* were the noble class of Muslims which include Saiads, Sheikhs, Pathans, Moghul, Mallick and Mirza. The *Ajlaf* were lower classes of cultivating Sheikhs, Darzi, Jolaha, Dhobi, Hajjam etc. The *Arzal* were the degraded classes of Hijra, Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Mehtar. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 229.

<sup>420</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 230.

undertook occupations deemed to be unclean were contemptuously treated. The social distinctions may be due to the influence or imitation of caste but it was not the caste system as such. Yet, for Dr. Ambedkar, unequal treatment of fellow believers among Muslims was inexcusable. The conclusion of his study was that social inequality and unjust segregation were deeply ingrained in the Indian culture from which no religion had escaped. Consequently the Indian Muslim community like others was not shielded from wounds caused by its oppressive practices.

## 5.2 Inclusion by Exclusion

For Dr. Ambedkar kinship among Muslim believers was an attractive social trait. However, he could not explain the practice of inclusion at the cost of excluding those who were different. In his line of reasoning he expected that the inclusive feeling of kinship of believers was an ideal that should have been applied in a wider sphere to include different people in different ways. Therefore, he was at a loss to harmonize the doctrine of *dar-ul-Islam* (house of Islam) with the idea of *dar-ul-Harb* (house of war).<sup>421</sup>

He was particularly perturbed by the discriminatory nature of peace offered under *Dar-ul-Islam*.<sup>422</sup> In other words, the survival of other people was offered not as a right but as sufferance under the Muslim rulers. Accordingly he concluded that Muslims offered peace only to their co-religionists. Of course, it is true that some sectarian leaders make an absolute claim of religious doctrines. However, Dr. Ambedkar also cited the example of Sir Sayyed Ahmed who had weaning Muslims from the extreme view of regarding India under the British as an abode of war. From this we learn the possibility to make religious ideas socially useful. His reference to the doctrines of *dar-ul-Islam*, *dar-ul-Harb*<sup>423</sup> and *hijarat*<sup>424</sup> should be understood in this light. This is what Dr. Ambedkar wrote,

A discussion was started in the Muslim community, which Dr. Titus says lasted for half a century, as to whether India was Dar-ul-Harb or Dar-ul-Islam. Some of the more zealous elements ... did declare a holy war, preached the necessity of emigration (*Hijrat*) to lands under Muslim rule, and carried their agitation all over India.<sup>425</sup>

As we see here, Dr. Ambedkar brings this sensitive Islamic doctrine to fore, but what is not understandable is his failure to discuss Islamic provision of wider international relationships under the category of *dar-ul-sulh* or *al-ahd*<sup>426</sup> – which is a

<sup>421</sup> Ayesha Jalal. *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*. Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2008, p. 135.

<sup>422</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 294.

<sup>423</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 294.

<sup>424</sup> *Hijrat* refers to the forced departure of the Prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E.

<sup>425</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 294.

<sup>426</sup> *Dar-ul-Sulh* or *al-Ahd* 'the House of Truce' is accepted as a status given to a territory "by agreement". Such territory is not under Muslim rule. A historical example and the starting point of this is of the Christians of

condition to grant a tributary status, instead of annexing, the non-Islamic country. Knowing his analysis of the situation one can understand why it hardly surprised Dr. Ambedkar to note that despite alternative interpretation by moderates the Indian Muslims responded to the extremist view and some of them deserted their homes and left for Afghanistan.<sup>427</sup> This move was based on the idea of *hijarat* which prompts that one way to escape *dar-ul-Harb* is to migrate<sup>428</sup> to other Muslim territories.

In Dr. Ambedkar's view such doctrines and their interpretations served no useful purpose for Dalits. Indeed from his perspective, for the Dalits who had embraced Islam in order to progress, the 'house' needed to be peaceful and secured with a feeling of kinship and social equality.

### 5.3 War for Peace

Dr. Ambedkar's point was to show that the scope of *Jihad* covered religio-political sense in the mid twentieth Century in India. If *Hijrat* i.e. to migrate was one way for Muslims to respond to *dar-ul-harb*, then *Jihad* i.e. to struggle was another equally valid option.<sup>429</sup> Dr. Ambedkar would agree that the spread of Islam by arms was a religious duty upon Muslims in general, but what he failed to appreciate was that *Jihad* was never imposed as a *rukun* i.e. fundamental duty for Muslims.<sup>430</sup>

With his knowledge of the Indian colonial history, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that Muslim patriots preached *Jihad* during the *Khilafat* agitation (1920-21).<sup>431</sup> He demonstrated this by underscoring the inspiration behind the earlier 1857 uprising. This is what he wrote,

The curious may examine the history of the Mutiny of 1857 and if he does, he will find that, in part, at any rate, it was really a *Jihad* proclaimed by the Muslims against the British, and that the Mutiny as far as the Muslims were concerned was a recrudescence of revolt which had been fostered by Sayyed Ahmad who preached to the Musalmans for several decades that owing to the occupation of India by the British the country had become a Dar-ul-Harb. The Mutiny was an attempt by the Muslims to reconvert India into Dar-ul-Islam.<sup>432</sup>

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Nadjaran area with whom Mohammed concluded a treaty for protection and safety. Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* Vol-2, (Editors: H.A.R Gibb et.al.) Leyden: Late E.J.Brill Ltd., 1965, p. 131.

<sup>427</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 295.

<sup>428</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 295.

<sup>429</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 295.

<sup>430</sup> *Rukn* or *arkan* means 'corner'. In the religious and legal sense it involves five things. (1) the profession of faith *shahada*; (2) the pilgrimage *hadjdj*; (3) the worship *salat*; (4) fasting *sawm*; (4) almsgiving *zakat*, *sadaka*. However, according to S. Nomanul Haq the addition of *Jihad* as a sixth rukn by some authorities does not have a universal acceptance. Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* Vol-2, (Editors: H.A.R Gibb et.al.) Leyden: Late E. J. Brill Ltd., 1995, p. 596.

<sup>431</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 295.

<sup>432</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p.295.

Not only were the believers expected to participate in *Jihad*, but Dr. Ambedkar also pointed out that the conviction of Muslims allowing them to call a foreign Muslim power to help them succeed in *Jihad*<sup>433</sup> to be dangerous. This uncommon, but not unexceptional, interpretation of the 1857 War of Independence and the 1919 invitation to Afghan's *Amir* for invasion by the *Khilafatists*, both in Dr. Ambedkar's view were ideologically propelled by the doctrine of *Jihad*<sup>434</sup> against the British rule. While it was possible for Dr. Ambedkar to stay put with his critical observations at this point, he highlighted the view of Sir Sayyad Ahmed, a radical Muslim reformist, on this subject. He noted that it took some skill for Sir Sayyad Ahmed

To persuade the Indian Musalmans not to regard India under the British as Dar-ul-Harb merely because it was not under Muslim rule. He urged upon the Muslims to regard it as Dar-ul-Islam, because the Muslims were perfectly free to exercise all the essential rituals and ceremonies of their religion.<sup>435</sup>

In other words Dr. Ambedkar was not only aware that the doctrine of *Jihad* could be used by certain disaffected groups to stir violence, but he was also conscious that not all Muslims held the same view on this subject. However, he found it difficult to accept *Jihad* in terms of conflict to establish the House of Peace. The fundamental point of Dr. Ambedkar's critique is to ponder whether the doctrine of *Jihad*, with its subversive potential was capable of preserving the stability of society in non-Muslim States. What Dr. Ambedkar feared was that if this doctrine encouraged a perpetual restive state, it would only distract everyone's attention thereby indefinitely postponing crucial social issues of social equality and justice for the vulnerable minorities including Dalits.

## 6. Dr. Ambedkar's Enigma

We have seen above that Dr. Ambedkar's enigma was not only to explain the swift spread of Islam in Asia, Africa and Europe, but also to reckon with its strength in India. What exactly was in it that made it so appealing to the people? Keeping in view his definition of religion it is obvious that the sacred scheme for social governance that Islam offered was founded on equality and kinship. At the same time he was unable to understand the contradiction in ideals and practice of Muslims especially in treating people equally. He was at once attracted and disappointed with them. Yet he was not prepared to buy ideas tinted with prejudice. His underlining of the historian's observation that 'the Moors were far in advance of the Franks'<sup>436</sup> is indicative of the care he took to keep free from the trappings of

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<sup>433</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 296.

<sup>434</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 295.

<sup>435</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 294.

<sup>436</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-12, 1993, p.42-43.

European superiority vis-à-vis other nations. About the Muslims he welcomed Prof. Robinson's remark that 'had they been permitted to settle in Southern France they might have developed science and art more rapidly than did the Franks'.<sup>437</sup> Indeed he was aware how immense the Muslim culture and civilization was and he acknowledged its greatness in India. 'It is a mistake', he wrote, 'to suppose that the Mussalman sovereigns of India were barbarous and despots. On the other hand the majority of them were men of extraordinary character'.<sup>438</sup> If such were the credentials of Muslims then the question was whether Islam could provide an apt home for Dalits?

Clearly what Muslims offered to Dalits was significant—equality, kinship, peace and a new nation of Pakistan. Dr. Ambedkar knew how Islam in its submission to one God *Allah* imposed equality on its adherents. This is how Dr. Ambedkar explains it,

The Principle of Equality as taught in Christianity and Islam had no concern whatsoever with knowledge, wealth, or dress which are outward aspects of oneself. Both these religions consider a sense of humanity as the main feature of their religion. They preach that humanity should be respected by all and none should disrespect others, not should treat others as unequal.<sup>439</sup>

This alternative offer to the caste based social inequality should be regarded as crucial for reclamation of *selfhood* for Dalits, yet Dr. Ambedkar had reservations. For instance he was confused how to respond to the doctrine of *Dar-ul-Islam*. One might say that he would agree that for social, political and intellectual progress peace was essential. Yet he was puzzled how this ideal could be realized simultaneously with the idea of a nation that excluded the non-Muslims as *Dar-ul-Harb*. All said and done, he knew that the roots of Islam were not Indian but Arabian. Now while in his view this did not eliminate its viability to be accepted by Dalits—as Mongols, Kurds and Persians had done, but the pan-Islamic concerns that had visibly distracted its adherent from home priority to establish free and equal society was unacceptable to Dr. Ambedkar.

Furthermore, it is understandable why the doctrines of *Jihad* and *Hijrat* would be unattractive to Dr. Ambedkar. If *Jihad* suggested conflict and *Hijrat* recommended escape, then both become irrelevant for bringing social change in India. Although the utility of Islam lay in its social significance arising out of its ideals of equality and justice, Dr. Ambedkar found it difficult to square this with the idea of migration. Besides this we need to recognize the fact that Muslims in India largely did not migrate to the new country—Pakistan. How do we explain this? In my opinion the

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<sup>437</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 43.

<sup>438</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Commercial Relations in the Middle Ages' (1915), p. 55.

<sup>439</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Way Emancipation' (1936) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-III., 2003, p. 125.

political and economic grid within a society often supersedes the grip of religion and culture on people. This is obvious in what Dr. Ambedkar failed to see, but which a diplomat like Mani Shankar Aiyar<sup>440</sup> saw albeit much later in 1990.<sup>441</sup> With hindsight he wrote that 'it was the elitist electoral politics of British India, based on separate electorates and restricted to enfranchisement of the propertied few that resulted in Pakistan. It is true that the Muslim elite voted with their hands for Pakistan, it is equally true that, unless driven out by physical violence, the masses—Muslim or Hindu—voted with their feet to stay where they were'.<sup>442</sup> It was therefore reasonable that the Muslim communities were not prepared to accept political and economic losses that migration to Pakistan could bring. So wherever possible they stayed on in their traditional villages.

Furthermore as we have discussed above, Dr. Ambedkar assessed Muslim fraternity to be exclusively for the believers. This nature in some instances was so extreme that it took no notice of the concerns of fellow human being outside its social orbit. This is what he wrote,

Hinduism is said to divide people and in contrast Islam is said to bind people together. This is only a half truth. For Islam divides as inexorably as it binds. Islam is a close corporation and the distinction that it makes between Muslim and non-Muslim is very real, very positive and very alienating. The brotherhood of Islam is not the universal brotherhood of man. It is brotherhood of Muslims for Muslims only. There is fraternity but its benefit is confined to those within that corporation.<sup>443</sup>

Two features in particular which in Dr. Ambedkar's view deserved attention are brought to fore here. Firstly, the exclusivist nature of the Muslim fraternity of which none but a Muslim alone could enjoy.<sup>444</sup> Secondly, the nature of Muslim communal consciousness that capped one's local identity with the larger Muslim community. Yet Dr. Ambedkar was at a loss to explain the activities of Muslim leaders like Mohammed Ali Jinnah who were wholly nationalists and had refused to join *Khilafat Movement* (1920-1924). This is what he wrote about Mr. Jinnah,

Mr. Jinnah refused to join the *Khilafat* Conference. This was no doubt due to the fact that then he was only a statutory Musalman with none of the religious fire of the orthodox which he now says is burning within him. But the real reason why he did

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<sup>440</sup> Mani Shankar Aiyar was a leading Indian diplomat and an expert on international relations.

<sup>441</sup> Pakistan was partitioned from India on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 as an independent nation.

<sup>442</sup> Mani Shankar Aiyar. *Pakistan Papers*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers and Distributors Ltd., 1994, p. 101.

<sup>443</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 330.

<sup>444</sup> Interestingly Aslan's observation has a similar ring, 'Islam's quintessential communal character necessitates that any human rights policy take into consideration the protection of the community over the autonomy of the individual'. Cf. Aslan. *No god but God*. p. 264.

not join the *Khilafat* was because he was opposed to the Indian Musalmans engaging themselves in extra-territorial affairs relating to Muslims outside India.<sup>445</sup>

Accepting the fact that there is diversity of approach within the Muslim fraternity, Dr. Ambedkar would agree with those who would say that Indian Muslims had failed to protect their members from the tyranny of social evils prevalent in the subcontinent. Global consciousness of *Pan-Islamism* was of no use here. No untouchable converted to Islam was protected from isolation, inequality and discrimination as such. Despite their shared faith, the lot of Dalit converts was no different from those in other communities. Thus the prospects of restoration of *selfhood* looked bleak. The socio-economic conditions between the privileged and the disadvantaged co-religionists remained unchallenged and unabridged. In a situation like this Dr. Ambedkar concluded that the fate of Dalit Muslims was sealed. He assessed this to be so because the Indian Muslim community fell short of utility and justice which not only constituted the fundamental core of his understanding of authentic religion, but also contradicted the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of Islam.

Indeed Dr. Ambedkar unhesitatingly pointed out the social deficiencies of the Indian Muslims but he also highlighted their good practices. For instance, while discussing the issue of alcoholism which in 1939 on which the Health Commissioner of the Government of India had initiated deliberations, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that on the one hand 'the drink traffic was in the hands of the government' and on the other he underscored the restriction that Indian religions had placed on alcohol. This is what he wrote,

[T]he one good thing that the Indian religions have done, both Hindu and Mahomedan and the Zoroastrian religion, is that they do impose such an injunction which has been so strictly obeyed by a large part of our people.<sup>446</sup>

Besides this, he appreciated the Muslim community for taking advantage of educational opportunities provided by the Government.<sup>447</sup>

Having assessing the Indian Muslim community from various perspectives Dr. Ambedkar stopped short of recommending it to Dalits. He would agree that a religion that Dalits needed to reclaim their *selfhood* needed to do three things. One, bind them with their co-religionists in dignified equality. Two, it should unconditionally extend itself to extricate the fellow Dalits from the trap of caste and untouchability. Three, it should do this without imposing conditions on them. He would have expected the Muslims to help their Dalit converts in this task. Indeed in his line of reasoning one can see how much he would have appreciated a social

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<sup>445</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 318.

<sup>446</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'On Budget' (1939), Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-2, 2005, p. 29

<sup>447</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'On Grants for Education' (1927), Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-2, 2005, p. 41.

movement of Muslims to remove casteist social practices for restoring of social equality not only from the community of believers but also from society in general.

At the end we may well ask, has caste discrimination among the Muslims reduced in the modern Indian society? A study carried out by the two committees appointed by the Central Government of India suggests that caste discrimination is strong within the Indian Muslim communities. These were Gopal Singh Committee 1983 and Rajendar Sachar Committee 2006.<sup>448</sup> Another study initiated by the Indian Social Institute New Delhi was published in 2010 which similarly affirms social discrimination of Dalit Muslims. On the basis of their findings they recommended that the Dalit Muslims should have a separate identity within the Muslim fold, they should be considered under separate head in the census of India, exclusive policies for them in education and training institutes should be reserved and the Constitution should be amended to include the *julaha*, *nutt*, *bakkho*, *bhatiyara*, *kunjra*, *dhunia*, *kalal*, *dafli*, *halakhor*, *dhobi*, *rangrez*, *darji*, *cheek*, *meershikar*, *lalbengi* and *gorkan* in the Scheduled Castes.<sup>449</sup> Keeping this in view Dr. Ambedkar's critique of Muslim society is relevant even now.

## 7. Conclusion

WE CAN SEE THAT IT WAS NOT DR. AMBEDKAR'S PURPOSE to undermine any religion. His appraisal was aimed to assess Islam as a social force and Muslims as a social group. He critiqued to caution not to defame and his reprimands were not anathemas but to help people not to demonize Muslims except to know their social faults, for others were no better in discriminating Dalits. If, on the one hand, he was interested to estimate the value of Islam as a religion, then on the other, he was also interested to assess the condition of Dalits in the Muslim fold. One thing that certainly raised Dr. Ambedkar's disapproval was the replication of casteist practices by Indian Muslims. This was not inspired by Islam and had resulted in unequal treatment of their coreligionists. Earlier in 1935 his observation of the reason why despite the teachings of Islam which does not create the sense of high and low, its adherents did treat the Dalits with contempt was out of the fear that if they treated them as equals the Hindus of dominant castes in turn might treat them as low. His conclusion, therefore, that 'Muslims...also follow the Untouchability like Hindus'<sup>450</sup> indicated that Islam, like Hinduism, had dropped from his list of consideration.

Keeping in view of that Dr. Ambedkar had rejected the option of Islam; where else could he suggest his people to turn?

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<sup>448</sup> Archana Sinha. *Double Exclusion: A Study on Dalit Muslims in Selected States of India*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>449</sup> Archana Sinha. *Double Exclusion: A Study on Dalit Muslims*. p.142.

<sup>450</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Way Emancipation' (1936), *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-III., 2003, p.126.



## Chapter Six

### Response to Christians

#### 1. Introduction

On January 5, 1938 at a Christian gathering at Sholapur, Dr. Ambedkar said, "I have had a great impact on my mind of two great personalities, Buddha and Christ. I want a religion which could teach us to practice equality, fraternity and liberty".<sup>451</sup> His interest in Christianity has been attested by the Revd Ian Charles Weathrall, who recalls his reserved nature.<sup>452</sup> Weathrall was the vicar of St James's Church, Delhi, at that time. Among other Christians whom Dr. Ambedkar had personally known were Waskom Pickett, a Methodist Bishop, who had said that Dr. Ambedkar twice asked him for baptism, Bishop Samuel Azariah of Dornakal, Ms Mildred Drescher an American Methodist missionary and Lady Fanny Fitzgerald in London with whom he shared his insights on Biblical passages.<sup>453</sup> He must have known other Christians like Raja Maharaj Singh, the first governor of Bombay (now Mumbai) in free India; Dr. John Matthai, a member in the first Cabinet Ministers of Nehru (the first Indian Prime Minister) and Dr. H.C. Mookerjee who was the Vice-President of the Constituent Assembly which drafted the Constitution of India.<sup>454</sup> Although Dr. Ambedkar sternly noted the disinterest of Indian Christians to fight social injustice,<sup>455</sup> the impact of Christianity on him was so great that throughout the volumes of his works he cited examples from the Christian world.<sup>456</sup> Yet he was

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<sup>451</sup> Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. New Delhi, National Book Trust, India, 2007, p. 122.

<sup>452</sup> For instance, in the winter of December 1952 and January 1953 Dr. Ambedkar made several visits to the Revd Ian Charles Weathrall. Dr. Ambedkar could do this as his residence at Alipur Road Delhi was close to the Church of St James at Kashmere Gate Delhi. Despite the Vicar's advice for the alternative Proposed Prayer Book, he insisted in reading the 1662 Prayer Book that contained the 39-Articles of Faith (Anglican). He used to read it in the Lady Chapel of the Church and sometimes sitting in his car. Revd I.C. Weathrall felt that by that time Dr. Ambedkar had already dropped the idea of considering Christianity as a possible home for Dalits. I was told this verbally by Revd Weathrall on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008 at his residence i.e. the Brotherhood House, 7-Court Lane, Rustamji Sehgal Marg, Delhi -54.

<sup>453</sup> The references to these people are strewn in many books. Some of these references that I used are from the following books: Stephen Neill. *Men of Unity*. London: SCM Press. 1960, p. 57; Arthur G. McPhee. *Road to Delhi: Bishop J Waskom Pickett Remembered 1890-1981*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 240-247; Nanak Chand Rattu *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*. Focus Impressions, 2001, pp 124-152.

<sup>454</sup> Jack C. Winslow. *The Eyelids of the Dawn: Memories, Reflections and Hopes*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954, p. 123.

<sup>455</sup> Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Translated by Asha Damle) New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2007, p. 122.

<sup>456</sup> In his speech to the first Constituent Assembly of India in 1949 as Dr. Ambedkar presented the Draft Constitution for India he cited a record of a discussion of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America whether they could pray for the nation. This citation of the record was this: 'Some years ago the American Protestant Episcopal Church was occupied at its triennial convention in revising its liturgy. It was thought desirable to introduce among the short sentence prayers a prayer for the whole people, and an eminent New England divine proposed the words, "O Lord, bless our nation". Accepted one afternoon on the spur of the moment, the sentence was brought up next day for reconsideration, when so many objections were raised by the laity to the word 'nation' as importing too definite a recognition of national unity, that it was dropped and instead there were adopted the words 'O Lord, bless these United States'. Dr. Ambedkar observed that 'there was

uncertain about them. On the one hand, he admired their religion, but on the other, he criticized their society and doctrines. In his reflections he fluctuates from sympathy and antipathy for Christians. Perhaps one way for a reader to steer through this ambiguity is to juxtapose his stand against caste with egalitarianism of Christianity. He refused to support Indian Christians for their compromise on social equality. It is this tension which comes through in his articles.

With this in mind Dr. Ambedkar reflected on the future of the Christians after India's independence from the British rule. His concern was whether Christianity would play any significant social role for restoring the *selfhood* of Dalits in the future or whether it would be reduced by the socially dominant people to insignificance as a vestige of British imperialism. The anchor of his assessment fell on the second possibility. The struggle of Christians to shed off their image as adopters of a foreign religion is evident in many places in Dr. Ambedkar's writings. Here a retort of an Indian Christian to Mahatma Gandhi reminding him that Indian Christians too were patriotic and keen on the affairs of their country like their compatriots, is a case in point.

The first (evidence) is from an Indian Christian to Mr. Gandhi and published in the *Young India*, August 25, 1921. This is what it says: "I am sorry to say that you do not take us Indian Christians as the people of India, as I have seen many times *Young India* mentioning Musalmaans, Hindus, Sikhs, etc., but omitting the Christians. I should like you to believe that we Indian Christians are also people in India, and take much interest in India's own affairs".<sup>457</sup>

This response shows that the Indian Christians felt alienated in their country. In this connection Dr. Ambedkar's response was not clear. The discussion of this chapter is taken up with this in view. It brings out both, his attraction and repulsion for Christians. This ambiguity in his approach arose from the peculiar nature of Christianity in India. This we will discuss the subsequent sections below.

## 2 A Paradoxical Religion in India

Dr. Ambedkar's ambiguity for Indian Christians was due to the paradoxical nature of their social life. This comes out in his writings as he assessed Christianity's extroversive character by raising two questions: First, did it advocate equality? Secondly, did its adherents treat each other as equals?<sup>458</sup> Clearly the measuring line of his assessment was the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* as propounded in the

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so little solidarity in the U.S.A. at the time when this incident occurred that the people of America did not think that they were a nation. If the people of United States could not feel that they were a nation', Dr. Ambedkar mused, 'how difficult it is for Indians to think that they are a nation'. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Closing Speech in the First Constituent Assembly of India' in *Great Speeches of Modern India* (Editor: Rudrangshu Mukherjee), New Delhi: Random House, 2007, p. 219.

<sup>457</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 474.

<sup>458</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 87.

gospel of Jesus Christ, namely egalitarianism of the Kingdom of God. He found that the community did not always live up to the expected standard of its founder. In this section we will take up three issues where he found Christians in India were deficient. These were to do with caste, community and ethics which were crucial for Dr. Ambedkar to assess the suitability of a religion for Dalits.

### **2.1 Concerned yet Disregard for the Rejected People**

Dr. Ambedkar found it difficult to square the extensive work of mission among Dalits with the disinterest of the educated Christians to advocate the cause of their Dalit coreligionists. They did little to protect the civil liberties of Dalit Christians. At this juncture Dr. Ambedkar could not foresee a time when political consciousness of Christians would arise. However, at the time when he was writing his articles on Christians, he insisted that this disinterest of educated Indian Christians was based on the divisive line of caste and class. The educated Christians who were converts from the privileged classes did not entirely understand the disadvantages of their Dalit coreligionists. In this light we need to understand why in one place he writes, 'for centuries Christians Missions have provided for them a shelter, if not a refuge'<sup>459</sup> yet in another he observed that there was no feeling of kinship between the educated class and backward mass of Christian community.

[W]ithin the Christian community the educated class and the mass had no kinship...the educated class is largely *Drawn* from the touchable or the higher classes. This educated class being detached from the lower or the untouchable class of Christians is not charged with the wants, their pains, cravings, desires, aspirations of the latter and does not care for their interest. The untouchable Christians are therefore leaderless and therefore unable to mobilize for the redress of their wrongs.<sup>460</sup>

This obviously was paradoxical. How far Dr. Ambedkar's judgment was correct is difficult to gauge now. We may from hindsight see that it was impossible for numerically insignificant educated Christians to create a political stir. The missionaries on the other hand disassociated themselves from direct political involvement at least for two reasons: One, that the East India Company had been cautious with the missionary enterprise in India. Subsequently the government under the British Crown committed itself to a neutral policy as far as the religious-cultural practices in India were concerned. So the missionaries too wanted to be politically correct; two, that they came from countries that were at war in Europe especially the allied countries versus the Germans and Turks. Dr. Ambedkar overlooked the complexities that must have affected the missionaries who came

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<sup>459</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 450.

<sup>460</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 472.

from politically polarized countries in Europe. For instance, the Germans, albeit missionaries, were being perceived as a British enemy during the World Wars and therefore kept under arrest in India during those years. These instances indicate that the missionaries could not have risked advocacy for Dalits thereby being perceived as instigators of any political cause by the government even if it were for the civil liberty of Dalit converts.

The exceptions to this were missionaries like Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), erstwhile member of the Cambridge Brotherhood in Delhi, who openly supported the nationalist aspirations of independence of India from the British rule.<sup>461</sup> However, Dr. Ambedkar was uncertain of those missionaries who like Andrews were supportive of Mahatma Gandhi on the ground that they did not adequately oppose the caste system.<sup>462</sup> Having said that, let us see another paradox which was hard for Dr. Ambedkar to piece together. This pertained to the social life of Christians in India.

## **2.2 Equal yet Disjointed**

Dr. Ambedkar was appreciative of the ideals of social equality in Christianity but his question was this: Why did equality fail to forge unity among the Christians? Dr. Ambedkar preferred the word 'disjointed' to explain that the incoherent social life of Christians was more complex than mere denominational division.<sup>463</sup> The word 'disjointed' figuratively described their belongingness to one body, yet the joints of this body were pulled apart. So one disjointed part refused to cooperate with the other whether it was due to denominational difference or lingual or cultural distinctions. As a result Christians were incapable to put up a united front either as a political power or as a social force. As a disjointed body they were unable to coordinate and control their common life or have a shared aspiration. This was Dr. Ambedkar's entirely new way of describing the fragmented nature of the Indian Christian community.

Indian Christian is a disjointed ... community. All that it has in common is a common source of inspiration. Barring this one thing which they have in common everything else tends to keep them apart. Indian Christians like all other Indians are divided by race, by language, and by caste. Their religion has not been a sufficiently strong unifying force as to make difference of language, race and caste as though they were mere distinctions. On the contrary their religion which is their only cement is infected with denominational differences. The result is that the Indian Christians

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<sup>461</sup> Constance Millington. *Whether We Be Many Of Few: A History of the Cambridge/Delhi Brotherhood*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1999, p. 86.

<sup>462</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Under the Providence of Mr. Gandhi' (1931), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. p. 300.

<sup>463</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

are too disjointed to have a common aim, to have a common mind and to put a common endeavour.<sup>464</sup>

Obviously in the face of disjointedness genuine equality and solidarity in Christian community was doubtful. His critique of Christian preaching from this perspective was that it was less centered on social and more on attitudinal change. This paradox called his attention to advise the missionaries to engage in social reform movements to end the injustice of discrimination that pursued Dalits even after they had converted to Christianity.<sup>465</sup> He analyzed that the disjointed nature of the Christian community had failed their Dalits converts to voice their demand for the rectification of the wrongs done to them.<sup>466</sup>

One more thing that we need to see here is Dr. Ambedkar's view of inter-church conflict as a drawback of Christianity.<sup>467</sup> This too added to the paradoxical nature of Christianity in India. Not only did he discuss the struggles of the Syrian Orthodox against the Roman Catholics but it also led him to conclude that this bitter history also was a reason for the disjointed<sup>468</sup> Christian community.<sup>469</sup> But the worst effect was that it detracted Dalits, from being mobilized. This adversely affected their interest both to protect their civil rights and also to make Indian society more egalitarian.

Dr. Ambedkar not only highlighted the detrimental nature of inter-church conflict but also its futility. It blurred the vision of social reform of the ideals of divine governance as propounded in the gospels namely, egalitarianism, fellowship and freedom. In his articles this inconsistency of Christianity in India is at once evident: A religion that preached social equality was divided by conflicts of race, language and caste. This is another example that explains Dr. Ambedkar's ambiguous response to Christians.

### **2.3 Scholarly yet Immoral**

Another example that brings out the paradoxical nature of Christianity in India was the presence of highly educated men and women among its adherents on the one hand yet on the other its failure to enhance morality among them, especially the Europeans. Dr. Ambedkar not only noted fine academic and professional achievements of the Indian Christians but observed with appreciation the high percentage of educated women in the Christian community.<sup>470</sup> He wrote, 'Not only

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<sup>464</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

<sup>465</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 471.

<sup>466</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 472.

<sup>467</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 438.

<sup>468</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

<sup>469</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 438.

<sup>470</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

the men are educated but also women are educated'.<sup>471</sup> Dr. Ambedkar noted the astonishing knowledge of European missionaries. Two outstanding names among such were of Joseph Beschi and Robert de Nobili. He pointed out that they not only mastered Tamil, but wrote and published many books in it too. Similarly about Robert de Nobili that, 'Book after book was written by the able and daring writer'.<sup>472</sup> But none aimed to reorder society on egalitarianism.<sup>473</sup>

Paradoxically these learned missionaries had little influence on the morals of Europeans posted in India. This moral crisis was recorded by Sir John William Kaye in *Christianity in India* (1859) and Captain Williamson in *Indian Vade Mecum* (1809). Attention should be drawn to Dr. Ambedkar's advantage in using these western sources. Their projection of the British shielded him from being perceived as prejudiced.<sup>474</sup> From these sources he showed how bad the morals and behaviour of the European Christians were.<sup>475</sup> In this line of concern Dr. Ambedkar further noted that the English settlers in India who had worked through the first eighty years of the seventeenth century did not build any Church.<sup>476</sup> This again was a paradox of Christians who to their own moral detriment did not bother to build Churches in India. This licentious life of European Christians left the Indians appalled and shocked. They thought that Christians had no religion to discipline them.

Such was the disorderliness and immorality among Englishmen in India. No wonder that the Indians marvelled whether the British acknowledged any God and believed in any system of morality. When asked what he thought of Christianity and Christians an Indian is reported to have said in his broken English—"Christian

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<sup>471</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

<sup>472</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 457.

<sup>473</sup> Dr. Ambedkar was citing from Dr. J.N. Ogilvie's book *Apostles of India* in 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 456. This is what Ogilvie wrote about Joseph Beschi, an Italian Missionary 'But Beschi was no empty headed poseur. His method was adopted with a full understanding of the people and with many it worked well. Nor does his fame rest on these extravagances; it is based upon his wonderful scholarship. A born linguist he attained so complete a mastery over Tamil that he became the ablest Tamil scholar of his time. No native scholar was his equal. "High" Tamil as well as "Low", the Tamil of scholarly Brahman as well as the colloquial language of the people were equally familiar to Beschi. Dictionaries, grammars, works of poetry and treatises in prose issued from his busy pen and they are read and valued to the present day'.<sup>473</sup>

<sup>474</sup> The line of argument was that those who came from Europe were middle class men and youngsters. Many among them were under disgrace at home and the offer of the East India Company was a welcome escape. However, in an alien territory free from all social controls they could not have been expected to behave any better. This was evident from what Kaye wrote about the Company boys: "they cheated; they gambled; they drank; they revelled in all kinds of debauchery. Associates in vice, they linked together by a common bond of rapacity, they still often pursued one another with desperate malice, and, few though they were in numbers, among them was no fellowship, except a fellowship of crime." Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 431.

<sup>475</sup> Indicating the bad morals Dr. Ambedkar wrote 'In these factories of the East India Company there was enough of internecine strife and the factors of the Company committed scandalous outrages in general defiance both of the laws of God and the decencies of man. They fought grievously among themselves; blows following words; and the highest persons in the settlement settling an example of pugnacity with their inferiors under the potent influence of Drink'. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 431.

<sup>476</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 432.

religion, devil religion; Christian much drink; Christian much do wrong; much beat, much abuse each other.”<sup>477</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar concluded that moral decadence of the Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a dual effect. It not only brought Christianity into disrepute, but also made its spread difficult.<sup>478</sup> We can phrase his insight like this: the snag of Europeans became a drawback of Christian religion; in turn this drawback became an obstacle to initiate social reform which ultimately was a loss for Dalits. When put like this it helps us to see why Dr. Ambedkar couldn't adopt a clear line for Christians.

Besides these obvious examples of paradoxes, we will see that throughout his writings he harboured ambiguous feelings not only for Christians but also for their religion in India.

### 3 Ancient yet Modern

In Dr. Ambedkar's time Christianity was the latest religion that was making headway in India yet he knew that Christianity was not new in India. Christians had enjoyed a long history stretching back into antiquity. Here one can see the advantage of placing Christianity even before *Bhakti* that developed in 950 C.E. with the *Bhagwata Purana*,<sup>479</sup> though its seeds were earlier laid in the *Bhagwad Gita* (circa 200 B.C.E.).<sup>480</sup> Be this as it may, it was difficult to square modern Christianity with the ancient Christian communities in India. The former was dynamic but the latter was stratified. Dr. Ambedkar did his best as an impartial guide to weave these two poles in to a common history of Indian Christians. Equally important in his view was the fact that for centuries Christian missions had provided shelter for Dalits, if not refuge.<sup>481</sup> In spite of this notable feature it had failed to challenge the society ordered on the caste-system. In the following sections we will see how in his response he wrestled with Christianity which was at once acculturated and yet unfamiliar to many in India.

#### 3.1 The Ancient Tradition

Dr. Ambedkar's narrative of the pious legends of the apostolic origins of Indian Christianity to indicate its rootedness in the Indian soil is obvious. This included the stories of Apostle Thomas and preaching of the Gospel in the first century. The depth of Dr. Ambedkar's interest in Christianity is evident in the

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<sup>477</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 434.

<sup>478</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 235.

<sup>479</sup> *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*. Betty Radice (ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1976. p. 17.

<sup>480</sup> Robin Boyd. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. New Delhi: SPCK, 1989, p. 110.

<sup>481</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 450.

endless trouble he took to read the works of Smith Robertson and George Smith.<sup>482</sup> An interesting note of history he picked was the presence of a prelate in the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. who described himself as the 'Metropolitan of Persia and of the Great India'. Accordingly Dr. Ambedkar noted that 'this fact seems to indicate that there was at that time a Christian Church of some bulk and significance planted on the Indian Coast'.<sup>483</sup> The first phase of the growth of the Christianity, he contended, came to an end in the sixth century when Islam swiftly expanded across Asia and knocked at the portals of Europe. All this about the world Christianity was narrated by Dr. Ambedkar as nothing more than a matter of fact. Clearly Christians in India besides being an ancient community had a recorded history since the fifteenth century. But Dr. Ambedkar nowhere states this with clarity.

He also underscored the work the Protestant Mission starting with the Lutheran missionaries in Tranquebar in 1706 and of Christian Fredrick Schwartz in Tiruchirapalli and Tanjore in 1779.<sup>484</sup> Dr. Ambedkar's aim to trace Indian Christian history was to demonstrate that despite its ancientness its numerical strength was dismal. Outside Kerala the numerical strength of Indian Christians was entirely due to the Dalit and Adivasi converts. Curiously Dr. Ambedkar leaves his readers clueless of his opinion whether he was happy with this situation or not.

The endeavour for the spread of Christianity would be hopeless if there were not in India that vast body of untouchables who, by their peculiar circumstances, are most ready to respond to the social message of Christianity.<sup>485</sup>

From the 1931 census he pointed out that the Indian Christian population was only 1.7 percent.<sup>486</sup> There was another point in Dr. Ambedkar's narrative where we need to draw our attention. He underscored that Indian society was host to Christianity where it grew and flourished with indigenous flavour since antiquity. Here the question that needed an answer was this, how was he to judge modern Christianity from the west vis-à-vis the ancient Christians in India? We shall look at Dr. Ambedkar's answer to this question in the sections below.

### 3.2 Syrio-Latin Controversy

Dr. Ambedkar found that the insistence of the Roman Catholic Church to dominate despite preaching love and fellowship as unreasonable. The fact was that

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<sup>482</sup> The Editors of the sixth volume of *Writings and Speeches* have identified some of these books: Kaye *Christianity in India*; J.C. Marshman *Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*. 2-Volumes 1859; George Smith *Conversion of India* 1893; Smith Robertson *The Religion of the Semites* 1889; Winslow *On Christianity in India*.

<sup>483</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 429. Nonetheless he was quick also note that this title could have 'probably implied little more than an Episcopal claim to what had always, as in the book of Esther, been considered a province of the Persian Empire'.

<sup>484</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 429-230.

<sup>485</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 426.

<sup>486</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 427.



the unchallenged presence of the Syrian Church came to an end with the arrival of the Portuguese. With them western Christianity visited India as a religion wedded to political authority. This resulted in a distressing conflict between the Syrians and the Catholics. Curiously Dr. Ambedkar was not interested to defend either the Syrians or the Roman Catholics; except to point out how the appalled Portuguese Catholic declared the appearance of the Syrian Churches as barely disguised heathen temples. On their turn the Syrians shivered by the custom of the Catholics. 'The Syrians Christians', Dr. Ambedkar wrote, 'shrank with dismay from the defiling touch of the Roman Catholics of Portugal and proclaimed themselves Christians and not idolaters.'<sup>487</sup> As a result of inquisitions the two churches were polarized to the extreme. The Roman Catholic inquisitors had condemned the Syrian Christians as heretics and their Patriarch of Babylon as schismatic. The Syrian Orthodox leaders who resisted the Roman Catholic intrusion suffered at the hands of the Roman ecclesiastical authorities and many preferred to die denying the supremacy of the Pope. Due to the restrictions placed by the Portuguese, the Syrian congregations were seriously deprived of pastoral care.

In these circumstances came Don Alexis Menezes, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Goa, to offer succour to the neglected flock of the Syrian Church, interestingly with the help of the military force. Dr. Ambedkar narrated the quick succession of events of how the Syrian Archdeacon attempted to resist Menezes. But Menezes was resolute, 'No fear of resistance could divert him from his purpose'. This was followed by the well known incident of the Syrian Archdeacon who under duress signed the document to sever links with their Patriarch in Iraq. This, however, was unacceptable to the people.

He publicly excommunicated the acknowledged head of the Syrian Churches, and called upon the startled Archdeacon to sign the writ of excommunication. Frightened and confused the wretched man put his name to the apostate document; and it was publicly affixed to the gates of the church. The intolerable insult on the one hand – this wretched compromise on the other – roused the fury of the people against the archbishop and against their own ecclesiastical chief.<sup>488</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar described how the helpless Archdeacon of the Syrian Church eventually pleaded with the people to forgive his mistake, restrain from violence and yet firmly resist papal aggression. He reasoned with them that disguising of intention would be more pragmatic than revenge; and promised, in spite of what he had done, he would defend their religion. Then dramatically with a shout of consent they swore that they would never surrender their freedom to the papal authority.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 435.

<sup>488</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 436.

<sup>489</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 436.

A reader may find Dr. Ambedkar's uncommitted silence through the narrative uneasy.

In this Dr. Ambedkar's unspoken message was that Christianity was not an alien monolithic religion and that the Indian Christian community had its own indigenous history of violent struggle against the western papacy. His narrative of the horrendous methods adopted by Menezes which extended limitlessly to Syrian churches brings out the irony of one Christian community battling against another.

'But Menezes', Dr. Ambedkar wrote, 'was a man of too many resources to be worsted in such a conflict. His energy and perseverance were irresistible; his craft was too deep to fathom. When one weapon of attack failed, he tried another. Fraud took the place of violence; money took the place of arms. He bribed those whom he could not bully, and appealed to the imaginations of men when he could not work upon their fears. And little by little, he succeeded. First one church fell, and then another. Dangers and difficulties beset them. Often had he to encounter violent resistance, and often did he beat it down. When the strength of the Syrian Christians was too great for him, he called in the aid of the native princes'.<sup>490</sup>

The important point of this narrative is to sense Dr. Ambedkar's intent to demolish the notion that gave credit to the western colonizers for introducing Christianity in India. Accordingly it was unfair to treat Christians as aliens; for Christianity had had a two millennia long history in India. For Dr. Ambedkar, the Synod of Diamper (1599) was a defining moment in the history of the Indian Church. The acceptance of the decrees of this Synod by the Syrian Orthodox Archdeacon George-of-the-Cross<sup>491</sup> and his initiative to inform the Pope that the Thomas Christians having abandoned the Patriarch of Babylon were prepared to have a Bishop appointed by Rome demonstrated the presence of Christians prior to the arrival of western colonizers.<sup>492</sup>

However, Dr. Ambedkar's disappointment with western missionaries arose from his anticipation of social reform through their efforts. This expectation was misplaced because he failed to reckon the nature of Church. Like any other institution it was the product of its times. Accordingly in that period the church's fixation was with imperialism, not social reform. Colonial Christianity was tied up with political power and naturally after the decline of the Portuguese interest, the servitude of the ancient Syrian Christians for sixty years also ended.<sup>493</sup> The point in this sketch was to draw attention to the fact that social inequality based on caste and untouchability remained unquestioned throughout ecclesiastical turbulence. Dr.

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<sup>490</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p 437.

<sup>491</sup> Joseph Thekkedath. *History of Christianity in India* Vol-2. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India. St Peter's Seminary, 1982, p. 64.

<sup>492</sup> Thekkedath. *History of Christianity in India* Vol-2. p.75.

<sup>493</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), p. 438.

Ambedkar's silence in this narration is understandable. Clearly in his dilemma he could not articulate his opinion for a religion he knew had much to offer but had failed to share it. Having thus sketched the history of the Syrian and Roman Catholic churches, it was reasonable for Dr. Ambedkar to study Protestant missions as they were comparatively late comers on the Indian scene. Now the question was this, did they attend to the problem of social inequality of caste?

### **3.3 Protestant Missions**

Protestant mission from its inception, despite the large conversion of Dalits to it, had no vision for re-ordering society on egalitarian lines. Clearly the dilemma of the missionaries to present Christianity as a religion crossing all social fronts comes to the fore in his writings. One way out for the missionaries was to tolerate caste distinctions among their newly baptized flock so that those from the clean castes may suffer no scruples. Tracing the beginnings of the Protestant missions from 1643 marked by the arrival of the Dutch in Sri Lanka, he showed that it took almost two centuries of caste accommodation to shape Indian Protestants.<sup>494</sup> With the knowledge of history that he had, Dr. Ambedkar underscored the firm methods of the Dutch in Sri Lanka, like placing restrictions on erecting Temples, encouraging Christians to fill in the Government vacancies and ensuring religious instruction as a statutory requirement.<sup>495</sup> His point was that despite all this they failed to resist the caste system when it eventually entered the Church. It must be admitted that such ironies were the cause of Dr. Ambedkar's ambiguity to Christians.

A little known fact of the early history of the British East India Company was that it did take the initiative to Christianize India. To demonstrate this Dr. Ambedkar narrated a rare and an interesting story of a young Indian who was taken to London in a Company's vessel in 1614. In a church in Poplar he was baptized as Peter. He symbolized the conversion of India to Christianity. In this story Dr. Ambedkar saw a ray of hope. He retrospectively contended that this could have triggered a movement commencing reform to bring greater social equality in India under the Protestant missions. Let us hear this story as Dr. Ambedkar narrated it:

In 1614, a young Indian had been brought to London by the Captain of the Company's ship. The Company educated him at its own expense 'to be an instrument in converting some of his nation'. His baptism was performed at Poplar. The Lord Mayor of London and the Directors of the Company attended the Baptism. King James-I chose the name of Peter and the priest who baptized him presented him to the Audience as 'the first fruit of India'. In 1617 there took place in Surat the conversion of a Mahomedan. Thus the career of the Company began with

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<sup>494</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 460.

<sup>495</sup> Dr. Ambedkar cites that 'by 1685, 3,20,000 Singhalese had yielded to these methods' of conversion to Christianity. Cf. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 460-461.

conversions at both ends. In 1657 the Directors applied to the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford for a Chaplain “the Company having resolved to endeavour the advance and spread of the Gospel in India’. In 1698 the Company very readily accepted a clause in her Charter which required the Company’s Chaplains ‘should apply themselves to learn the language of the countries, the better to enable them to instruct the Gentoos who should be the servants of the Company or their agents, in the Protestant religion.<sup>496</sup>

What dismayed him was how this happy start suddenly slowed down after 1698.<sup>497</sup> In a way Dr. Ambedkar is unfair to his readers by falling short to clarify his perspective for this decline of interest of the Company. Was the apprehension of the Company officers of a possible uprising due to preaching would be detrimental to the economic interest of the British, justifiable? The answer would be “yes” if viewed from the fact that the Company needed the loyalty of the Indians who administered their bureaucracy and cooperation of the *maharajas* or the rulers who ruled the princely states. Economic activity could be paralyzed in the absence of order under the established rule of the Company. Whatever other reasons there might have been, attention should be drawn to the Dr. Ambedkar’s fundamental point that the possibility for social change on egalitarian lines came to an abrupt end.

However those in favour of disseminating Christian knowledge among the populace were unhappy with this state of affairs. Opportunity came in their way when the 1773-Regulating Act and the Pitt’s East India Act made the Company an Agent of Parliament to govern the Indian Territories. Under this Act it was obligatory for the Company to renew its charter every twenty years. Accordingly in 1793 the revision of the Company’s Charter was due. Admittedly, Dr. Ambedkar assumed that egalitarianism would have got an impetus with the spread of Christian knowledge among Indians if Mr. William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a known campaigner against slave-trade in the British parliament, had been able to get his resolutions incorporated in the Company’s Charter<sup>498</sup> which was being placed for renewal in the House of Commons at Westminster.

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<sup>496</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Condition of the Convert’ (1937), p. 461.

<sup>497</sup> Dr. Ambedkar noted that this change in the approach of the East India Company did not affect the policy of active proselytizing of the Indians by the Dutch and the Portuguese Governments. Moreover he also observed that ‘while (the Company) accepted an obligation to train its Chaplain in vernaculars of India so as to make them potent instruments of propaganda it allowed a prayer to be drawn up for the Company which said, ‘that, we adoring the Gospel of our Saviour in all things, these Indians natives among whom we dwell, beholding our good works, may be won over’. This prayer continued to be offered, certainly till 1750. A close scrutiny of the wording of the prayer suggests if it does not avow the complete abandonment of the original idea of active proselytizing. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Condition of the Convert’ (1937), p. 461.

<sup>498</sup> Dr. Ambedkar published one of the Resolutions at full length as follows: “that it was the peculiar and bounden duty of the British Legislature to promote by all just and prudent means, the interest and the happiness of the inhabitants of the British Dominions in India, and that for these ends such measures ought to be adopted as may generally tend to their advancement in useful knowledge and to their religious and more improvement.” “Be it therefore further enacted, that the said Court of Directors shall be and are thereby empowered and required to appoint and send out, from time to time, a sufficient number of fit and proper persons for carrying

It is very interesting to note that Dr. Ambedkar could see what others could not at this point of time. This was the unseen hand of the caste system when Wilberforce's resolution in the third reading of the Bill was struck down.<sup>499</sup> With this setback he underscored the diminishing hope for social change through Protestant missions and the resultant resilience of casteism in India. Those supportive of the missionaries had lost to those who argued for the safety of Company's shareholders in case the missionary zeal caused insurrection from the natives.<sup>500</sup>

In this line of history, Dr. Ambedkar noted the change of attitude of the British East India Company. The Company's Governors grew hostile to the missionaries blaming them for the Vellore Mutiny in 1806. What amazed Dr. Ambedkar was that the caste people who were docile to foreign powers could at once rise up in rebellion if their caste purity was threatened by defilement. In these instances, Dr. Ambedkar wanted to make it clear that the leading circles all over the country would protect their caste purity with their lives. Understandably the Company Governors took cognizance of this and kept even the missionaries at bay perceiving that their work could provoke upheaval. Dr. Ambedkar felt that this was unjustified. Here he closely followed Sir John William Kaye who in his exhaustive volume *Christianity in India* (1859) had argued that the threat of caste pollution was not due to the propagation of Christianity but arose from within the government ranks.

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, 1813 marked the next phase of historical development when the Company became lenient to Protestant missions. It allowed them to establish philanthropic work in their territories and so the modern face of Christianity came into view. It is very interesting to note Dr. Ambedkar's target of criticism. It was the missionaries. The cost of this leniency, in his view, was the toleration of differences based on the caste system among the converts by them. To prove the setback that egalitarianism had suffered due to this Dr. Ambedkar cited

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into effect the purposes aforesaid, by acting as schoolmasters, missionaries, or otherwise every such person, before he is so appointed or sent out, having produced to the said Court of Directors, a satisfactory testimonial or certificate from the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the Bishop of London for the time being, or for the Society in London for the promotion of Christian Knowledge, or from the Society in Scotland for propagating Christian Knowledge, of his sufficiency for these purposes."

"And be it further enacted, that the said Court of Directors are hereby empowered and required to give directions to the governments of the respective presidencies in India, to settle the destination and to provide for the necessary and decent maintenance of the persons to be sent out as aforesaid; and also to direct the said governments to consider of and adopt such other measures according to their discretion, as may appear to them most conducive to the ends aforesaid." idem B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 462.

<sup>499</sup> Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the monopoly of the East India Company in India was such that 'no Englishman could enter its territories without the license from the Directors of the Company and any Englishman found in the territories of the Company without a license was liable to be deported. The Company did not take long to realize what the effect of the new clause would be. It knew that that clause would require them to open the gates of India to the flood of the Missionaries and their propaganda. Should the Missionaries be allowed a free hand, was the question of the hour.' Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 463.

<sup>500</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 464.

the examples of Bishop Reginald Heber (1783-1826), the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta. He had accepted caste distinction among the converts.<sup>501</sup> The sum of Dr. Ambedkar's appraisal can be expressed in one query—was it a correct venture for the missionaries to spread Christianity by compromising social equality? The answer would be obvious “no”!

In a way Dr. Ambedkar's criticism of Heber was deficient because he did not take into consideration the social pressures which Heber faced from the converts. A product of his times Heber concluded that Caste distinctions in India were similar to class distinctions in the nineteenth century Britain i.e. socio-economic classes. For this reason to assist the poor classes of people was regarded as a moral obligation by the affluent class in Britain. This was also stressed by European pietism which was influential till mid eighteenth century. In Britain too, the concern for personal salvation and charity to the poor and sick, with little thought for social reform, rose due to pietistic revival and the age of Enlightenment. Yet visionaries like John Newton (1725-1807), the owner of a slave trading ship to America and the West Indies plantations, could glimpse into the future and abandon his business to campaign against trading African slaves. For this cause he established strong connections with Wilberforce.<sup>502</sup> His famous hymn 'Amazing Grace' with a note of remorse for his sinful life underscores hope in a merciful God.<sup>503</sup> But such visionaries for radical social change were rare and Heber was not among such. Perceiving his role as a referee, Heber leaned towards peace pacifying all sections of newly converted Christians in India.<sup>504</sup> Obviously he could not see India as a society of equals freed from caste.

#### **4 Rulers but Weak**

Christianity under the British was in an awkward situation. On the one hand Christianity was the religion of the rulers of India, yet it was politically feeble. This was partly due to the British policy of neutrality as far as the religion was concerned. Consequently Christianity, despite being the religion of the rulers, was neither promoted by the State authorities nor publicly favoured by it. For this reason, Christians, in Dr. Ambedkar's view, could not succeed to establish the Indian society on the ideals of the *scheme-of-divine-governance* of the gospel which is egalitarianism. Understandably, Dr. Ambedkar's uncertain outlook for Christians was shaped by such a paradoxical nature of their community. This comes out in their social, political and economic standards. We shall take these up in the sections below.

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<sup>501</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 468.

<sup>502</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck. *101 Hymn Stories*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications.1982, p.30

<sup>503</sup> *The Virginia Harmony*. James P. Carrell and David S Clayton (Compilers) Winchester Virginia, 1831.

<sup>504</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 469.

#### 4.1 Social Status

The Social inequality among Christians in the Indian society varies from place to place. These variations were based on caste distinction and financial disparity. In some places the Christians enjoy privileged status like a superior caste, in other places they are treated as untouchables; in some places they are economically prosperous while in others, deprived.<sup>505</sup> It is surprising that Dr. Ambedkar did not see this complexity in the treatment meted out to Christians. But what he wrote about them was exaggerated. He claimed that they were the most educated community of Indians.

It is undoubtedly the most educated and enlightened community in India. Not only the percentage of literacy among Indian Christians is relatively larger than other communities in India but the University Graduate, doctors, lawyers are far in excess that can be found in communities which are vastly superior to them in number.<sup>506</sup>

This is not the whole truth. It fails to portray the ground reality of the Christian community in India. But was he ignorant of the internal inequality of Christians? And was he unaware of the social heterogeneity of Christian communities in India? To get a correct picture of Dr. Ambedkar's assessment of Christianity we must bring to light the information on which he had built his response.

What he wrote about Christianity in India was girded with two observations that were paradoxical in nature: 1. Christians were socially unequal in spite of Christianity being an egalitarian religion; 2. The Syrians enjoyed greater socio-political privileges than the rest in spite of being ancient and stratified. The point in these assumptions was that Syrian Christians by accepting the patronage of their rulers in Kerala gained an elite social position, but this privilege was not extended to the Dalit converts. The contradiction between the ancient and modern Christianity was that the Syrian community remained small, but the Dalit and Tribal adherents swelled in numbers. Dr. Ambedkar was aware of this when he wrote, "I am deeply interested in the Indian Christians because a large majority of them are drawn from the Untouchable classes".<sup>507</sup> Despite this numerical swell, Christians constituted an insignificant percentage of the whole Indian population. Dr. Ambedkar knew well that they did not count. This comes out in his reflection on the social status of Christians in India. 'Does the Indian Christian community count in India?'<sup>508</sup> he queried. This question was important to him because he knew that had it not been for the 'vast body of Untouchables who by their peculiar circumstances were most

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<sup>505</sup> Judith Brown. *Modern India: Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1984. p.148.

<sup>506</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

<sup>507</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

<sup>508</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

ready to respond to the social message of Christianity'<sup>509</sup> its presence would have been virtually absent in India.

Granted that Dr. Ambedkar's claim of the high status of education of the Indian Christians was an exaggeration, the truth, however, is that the proportion of educated people in the Christian community was higher. What he bemoaned was that the national leaders of his time did not take advantage of the enlightened Christians to bring about social transformation.

With all this light and learning the Christians as a community, it must he said, counts for very little – if at all – in the affairs of India.<sup>510</sup>

We see here a note of regret. However, this was not going to satisfy Dr. Ambedkar, he wanted to know the reason why Christians, despite being intellectually capable, lacked social standing in India. What Dr. Ambedkar wanted to uncover was its impact on the converts themselves. Did conversion and education help the Dalits to gain social dignity and restore their *selfhood*? This concern was directly about the social relevance of Christianity in the Indian context.

So we draw our attention to Dr. Ambedkar's inquiry on social emancipation. This is what he queried, 'Has Christianity been able to save the convert from the sufferings and the ignominy which is the misfortune of everyone who is born an untouchable?'<sup>511</sup> After discussing various social parameters, like, freedom to draw water from the public well, freedom to enter any hotel and to reside in the touchable quarters of a village, Dr. Ambedkar concluded that the condition of the Dalit convert to Christianity had not changed.<sup>512</sup> He further queried 'why has Christianity not succeeded in raising the status of the untouchable converts?' To find out the reason to this he analyzed the question in two parts:

- 1) What has Christianity done to make the Hindus move on?
- 2) Does Christianity inspire the Untouchable to move on?

In answer to the first query he pointed out that the Christians have believed that if their true idea were juxtaposed with a false idea, then miraculously the right idea will displace the false one.<sup>513</sup> The reason why Dr. Ambedkar disagreed with this trust upon the effectiveness of an idea was obvious. The 'right idea' as propounded

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<sup>509</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Christianizing the Untouchables' (1934), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 426.

<sup>510</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

<sup>511</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 470.

<sup>512</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 470.

<sup>513</sup> Dr. Ambedkar wrote that 'the faith in an idea doing the work has been well express by the late Duke of Argyle when he said, "there is no method of reform so powerful as this. If alongside any false or corrupt belief, or any vicious or cruel system, we place *one incompatible idea* – then without any noise of controversy or clash of battle, those beliefs and customs will wave an idea. It was thus that Christianity, without one single word of direct attack, killed off one of the greatest and most universal curses of the pagan world – the ever deepening curse of slavery" (quoted by C.F. Andrews in *Christ and Labour* p. 25). Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 471.



by Christians had made little impact on Hindus to seriously initiate social reform. This also was true for the Dalits.

Dependence of those in charge of Christian endeavour upon planting of an idea and leaving it to work a miracle is therefore one of the reasons why the untouchable had remained an untouchable notwithstanding his Christian faith.<sup>514</sup>

In similar lines he underscored the inadequacy of Christians when he wrote, 'I find they have done nothing. They seem to be depending upon an idea doing the miracle.'<sup>515</sup> He tried to establish this sweeping generalization by pointing out two examples in the Christian world. Both demonstrated the inadequacy of idea without adequate action. The first was the serfdom in Europe and the second was the slavery of the Afro-Americans in the United States. It is obvious that these two examples had the advantage of demonstrating the ineffectiveness of passive approaches; but in arguing that missionaries should become proactive Dr. Ambedkar failed to take two facts into account: One that it was impossible for the missionaries to mobilize the converts. They were too far and too few to spark social reform on a national scale. Two, the missionaries were aliens and were therefore cautious not to offend the cultural sensibilities of the recipient's culture.<sup>516</sup> This explains their toleration of caste segregation in the Church. But Dr. Ambedkar was not ready to accept such excuses; rather the inaction of the missionaries and the disinterest of the converts to restore justice were simply inexcusable.

The Christian Missionaries have never thought that it was their duty to act and get the injustice that pursues the untouchables even after his conversion to Christianity removed. That missions should be so inactive in the matter of the social emancipation of the untouchable is of course a very sad thing. But far more painful is the inaction of the untouchable who becomes a convert to Christianity. It is the saddest thing. He continues to suffer from the Hindus the same disabilities which were his lot before conversion. It is an extraordinary thing that the movement for the redress of wrongs is carried on by the untouchables who have not become converts to Christianity. I have never noticed the untouchable Christians meeting in conferences for the redress of their social wrongs.<sup>517</sup>

This excerpt reflects Dr. Ambedkar's uncertain response to Christians. What he argued here was that Dalits, in spite of turning to Christianity were not emancipated

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<sup>514</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 471.

<sup>515</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 470.

<sup>516</sup> For this reason the East India Company had also hesitated to open missionary enterprise, which we saw earlier in section 2.1.3 of this chapter. Here it must be stated that approach adopted by the British rulers towards the North Eastern tribes in India, where they had requested the missionaries to intervene, should not be confused with their policy of caution in mainland. Admittedly the reason for this divergence was that the British rulers had realized that underneath apparent similarity of social problems, the issues of tribal were distinct from Dalits.

<sup>517</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 472.

from social stagnation. Christianity had failed to help the Dalits to move on. Obviously he was unsure how far it was advisable for Dalits to adopt Christianity as their religion.

#### 4.2 Political Status

Paradoxically Christianity's privilege as the established religion of Britain brought it in conflict with the British imperial interest in India where it was a missionary religion. In its standing it was a non-State institution and the converts were not influential as a political front. An exercise of investigation led Dr. Ambedkar to realize that Christians were neither invited nor expected to actively participate in political movements or events at the national level. The question that Dr. Ambedkar begged an answer for was this: Why Christians in India were overlooked?<sup>518</sup> To continue his probe he took the Sikhs, another minority community, for comparison. He noted that, 'The Sikhs were not only mentioned but were treated as an important party without whose active cooperation it was felt that the struggle for *swaraj* or independence could not be carried on.'<sup>519</sup> But this, he observed, was not so with the Christians. Similarly he noted that cooperation extended by the Sikhs to Congress was on two conditions, firstly that the Sikh colour 'black' should find a place in the Indian national flag; And secondly that they should be guaranteed representation in the legislature.<sup>520</sup> Despite such demands the national leaders were interested to pacify the Sikhs; but showed little interest in Christians. Dr. Ambedkar offered two reasons for the neglect of Christians: one, that except some,<sup>521</sup> Christians were not actively involved in the Indian independence movement implying that they were not adequately patriotic, and two, that they simply did not count.

The only conclusion that one can draw for such an omission is that they did not count. It is a sad thing that so enlightened a community should have no importance and no influence in the affairs of the country.<sup>522</sup>

Granted that Christianity being the religion of the rulers was utterly overlooked by the nationalists but the query is this: why did Dr. Ambedkar bemoan such neglect of Christians in India? Of whose gain would their numerical strength be? Dr. Ambedkar's answer was based on the idea that unacceptability of Christianity in India was not due to its foreign origins but due to its emphasis on kinship, a value which appealed to the deprived but not to the privileged sections. This was an

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<sup>518</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 475.

<sup>519</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 474.

<sup>520</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 474.

<sup>521</sup> Dr. Ambedkar by name mentioned Mr. George Joseph, Mr. K.T. Paul and Dr. S.K. Datta as exceptions who participated in the *Swaraj* Movement.

<sup>522</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 475.

unusually different explanation than what other nationalists at that time had held about Christianity. This only shows that Dr. Ambedkar refused to fall in line with the general opinion. His thinking was original. About Christianity he wrote that,

It preaches brotherhood of man and when applied leads to equality of man. Now the interests of the Brahmin and the higher classes is to maintain the system of chaturvarna – which is a system based upon inequality and which in the scale gives them a higher rank, greater opportunity to dominate and exploit the others. How can they accept Christianity? It means surrender of their power and prestige.<sup>523</sup>

This excerpt is a typical sample of Dr. Ambedkar's appreciation of Christianity especially its egalitarianism. From his point of view one can say that the involvement of Christians in the advocacy to procure social equality and civil rights for Dalits would result in their numerical growth, which was crucial for the political prospect for a community. Even so, the problem with Dr. Ambedkar's view here is that it reduces Christianity to a sect for Dalits, robbing its inclusive and universal make-up.

#### **4.3 Economic Status**

The economic status of Indian Christians was incomparable with their European coreligionists who were in India. Despite his interest in the Indian Christians it is noteworthy that Dr. Ambedkar nowhere analyses their economic status. However, in view of his admittance that a large numbers of converts were Dalits, it would be reasonable to accept their economic conditions to be similar to the rest of their Dalit community. The Indian Christians from this point of view would be economically poor. Their conversion did not relieve them from the state of dependency albeit they now depended on the welfare schemes of the Christian missions. This is what Dr. Ambedkar meant by the term 'sheltered waters' in the excerpt below,

The Indian Christians are living in sheltered waters... For their education, for their medical care, for religious ministration and for most of their petty needs they do not look to the government. They look to the Missions<sup>524</sup> .

Economic dependence of converts on missions in Dr. Ambedkar's view was a sign of its failure to generate the community's ability to mobilize its members for demanding their rights of education, training and employment from the State. Such mobilization entailed disciplined and resolute assemblies in public places. He on the other hand appreciated the recruitment of Dalits particularly the *Mahars*, in Army's infantry. He observed that this had not only steadily improved the economic condition of the Dalits, but had motivated them for education and developed their

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<sup>523</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 444.

<sup>524</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 475.

confidence. After the Second World War the *Mahar* Regiment was dismantled. As this is not within the scope of our discussion here, we will take this up later in Chapter Seven. What we need to understand here is the point that Dr. Ambedkar made about the Indian Christians. In his view, their failure to demand their due share from the State resources was a sign of their lack of foresight. In his times Dr. Ambedkar could not foresee the future of the Indian Christians. The initiative of their future generations to arise with better educational abilities, economic prosperity and self dignity would prove their strength.

## **5 Empowering but Powerless**

As such Dr. Ambedkar was disinterested in dogmatic religion. His analyses of three Christian doctrines are interesting instances that throw light on his approach to theology. In his section we will see that he did not approach these doctrines from a theological but from the perspective of his own understanding of religion. Clearly, this shows his impatience with dogmatic claims of religion, yet he could not get completely rid of it. It is important to see that on the one hand he was influenced by the Christian value of equality, derived from the doctrine of the Image of God, and on the other he was critical of the doctrine of Original Sin. Similarly he was critical of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ and extolling poverty as a religious ideal. His criticism was that these doctrines were not only unjust and prompted inequality but were also unreasonable. We will discuss these in the sections below.

### **5.1 Doctrine of Original Sin**

Dr. Ambedkar regarded the doctrine of Original Sin of traditional Christian theology as a drawback. The reason for his criticism was that he regarded this doctrine as wholly inappropriate for those converts who were adversely affected by untouchability. But to say that Dr. Ambedkar denied the doctrine of the fall of humankind from righteousness would be a hasty conclusion. What he did was to explain the cause of fall in a different way. He argued that a person does not fall due to Adam's sin but due to wrong and unjust environment.

The Christian Church teaches that the fall of man (*sic!* human being) is due to his original sin and the reason why one must become Christian is because in Christianity there is promise of forgiveness of sins. Whatever may be the theological and evangelistic basis of this doctrine there is no doubt that from a sociological point of view it is a doctrine which is fraught with disaster. This Christian teaching is a direct challenge to sociology which holds that the fall of man is due to an unpropitious environment and not to the sins of man. There is no question that the sociological view is the correct view and the Christian dogma only misleads man. It sets him on a wrong trail. Instead of being taught that his fall is due to a wrong social and religious

environment and that for his improvement he must attack that environment he is told that his fall is due to his sin.<sup>525</sup>

It is obvious that his argument has advantage for Dalits. Unlike the doctrine of original sin that blames the victims for their adverse condition, Dr. Ambedkar argues to shift the blame away from them. This enables Dalits who have been victimized, to regain their *selfhood*. His argument also has the force to pin down injustice as a cause within the social environment which has been instrumental to the systematic operation of the caste system. Belief in the doctrine that Adam, a remote ancestor, had originally committed sin, in his view, was inappropriate. The disadvantage of this view was the idea of inevitability of the penalty of sin. In other words, as it was impossible to recede into the past to correct the remote ancestor, who committed the original sin, it was impossible to evade its bitter penalty in one's life now. Consequently, it was impossible to avert the predetermined consequences that falls on the descendents of Adam. Belief in such ideas made the converts nonchalant to get involved in the initiatives for restoring a just order in society.

The consequence is that the untouchable convert instead of being energized to conquer his environment contents himself with the belief that there is no use struggling, for [the] simple reason that his fall is due to the sin committed not by him but by some remote ancestor of his called Adam. When he was a Hindu his fall was due to the sins of his ancestor. In either case there is no escape for him. One may well ask whether conversion is a birth of a new life and a condemnation to the old.<sup>526</sup>

If we venture to juxtapose two doctrines with which he dealt i.e. Image-of-God and Original Sin, what comes out is a paradox which explains to a degree Dr. Ambedkar's uncertainty with Christian theology. If the former empowered people with dignity, the latter made them weak interiorly. Dalits are not sinners, as the logic of original sin imputes, rather they are sinned against by the dominant oppressors. But this position will be a contradiction to those who hold on to the idea of original sin. Such instances of contradictions set a challenge before the theologians to reorient their theological understanding of sin and salvation especially in connection with doing theology from a Dalit perspective. The question should be: If the Dalits have been sinned *against*, then what does salvation mean to them? Salvation then should be understood as emancipation from the dominant oppressors in this world here and now.

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<sup>525</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 472-473.

<sup>526</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 473.

## 5.2 Understanding of Christ

Another theological issue that drew Dr. Ambedkar's attention was Christology. Instead of writing directly about it he preferred to quote<sup>527</sup> Jack C. Winslow, the founder of an Anglican religious community called the *Christa Seva Sangha* at Miri near Ahmednagar, Central India, in 1922,<sup>528</sup> who had underscored those Christological propositions unacceptable to the Hindus.<sup>529</sup> The first was that Christ was divine in a unique way. The second that he alone was God incarnate. The third was that Christ exclusively was the means to salvation. These in Winslow's view made Christianity repulsive to Indians which explained their low numerical turnover to Christianity. Dr. Ambedkar did not commit himself to approve or disapprove these ideas at this stage. However, later in 1956 he plainly rejected Christ as the divine incarnation and the sole saviour of this world. He could not accept that a person had to depend on someone else for his/her salvation. Such doctrines placed the saviour at an unequal pedestal vis-à-vis the saved.

Christ claimed to be the prophet of Christianity. He further claimed that he was the Son of God. Christ also laid down the condition that there was no salvation for a person unless he accepted that Christ was the Son of God. Thus Christ secured a place for himself by making the salvation of the Christian depend upon his acceptance of Christ as the Prophet and Son of God.<sup>530</sup>

The challenge before us in the light of Dr. Ambedkar's response to Christians is to explore new radials for Dalit theology. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of thinking, these may be social theology and political theology. In the former the centre of reflection will be "society". The aim would be to reflect on how we should work to establish ideal rule of the gospel in the Indian society. In the latter, the centre of reflection would be the "Dalit communities". The aim would be to reflect on what God was doing through his people to emancipate the broken people. These theologies would become the voice of Dalit in public, as well as to resolve the paradoxes that had perplexed Dr. Ambedkar. They would also go beyond Dr. Ambedkar to inspire a new generation of Dalit young people to brace up to the task of building their broken communities with justice and solidarity.

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<sup>527</sup> The book identified by the Compilers of Vol-5 of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches* [1989] is "On Christianity in India" by Mr. Winslow is appended in the list of other books used by Dr. Ambedkar in the articles compiled in this volume.

<sup>528</sup> Jack C. Winslow. *The Eyelids of the Dawn: Memories, Reflections and Hopes*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954, p. 79.

<sup>529</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 453.

<sup>530</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol.11. Mumbai: 1992, p. 215.

### 5.3 Sublimation of Poverty

Another theological critique of Christianity is embedded in his defense of Buddhism to the Communist critique of religion. He wrote,

But to [a] communist Religion is anathema. Their [communist's] hatred to Religion is so deep seated that they will not even discriminate between religions which are helpful to Communism and religions which are not. The communists have carried their hatred of Christianity to Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between the two.<sup>531</sup>

This observation however cannot be taken for granted as a full rejection of Christianity. In fact in his article *Buddha or Karl Marx* he is unclear whether or not he accepted this critique of the communists against Christianity as valid. Nonetheless, it seems that he did to a degree agree with the communists for in the same paragraph he remarked that, 'the sermon on the Mount sublimates poverty and weakness. It promises heaven to the poor and the weak'.<sup>532</sup> Dr. Ambedkar underscored two criticisms of communists against Christianity. The first was to make the poor voluntarily accept poverty and the second was to offer them the false security of heaven.

The charge against Christianity levelled by the communists was two-fold. Their first charge against Christianity was that they made people otherworldly and made them suffer poverty in this world. ... The second charge levelled by communism against Christianity ... is summed up in the statement that Religion is the opium of the people. This charge is based upon the Sermon on the Mount which is to be found in the Bible.<sup>533</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar agreed with both these charges and at this juncture he was in no mood to defend Christian doctrines.

Here it is important to take into consideration Dr. Ambedkar's predicament to piece together what he saw in the gospels as two extreme poles. These were its liberating message on the one hand and on the other the glorification of poverty as an ideal. The former was just but the latter unjust because poverty made people unequal. Admittedly these puzzling contradictions left Dr. Ambedkar uncertain about Christianity.

## 6 Dr. Ambedkar's Dilemma

We have seen in our discussion above that Christianity confronted Dr. Ambedkar with irresolvable paradoxes. Under these circumstances his ambiguity towards Christianity can be expressed like this, should Christianity be propagated in

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<sup>531</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 460.

<sup>532</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956), p. 460.

<sup>533</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 460.

India? Surprise may well be expressed on a statement that was released on July 24, 1936 in the *Times of India* purportedly as Dr. Ambedkar's view. As it seems to offer an answer to the above query we need to read it in detail,

Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalize the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity, the numerical strength of Christians becomes five to six crores. It will help to strengthen the hold of the British on this country. On the other hand if they embrace Sikhism this will not harm the destiny of the country but they will help the destiny of the country. They will not be denationalized. On the other hand they will be a help to the political advancement of the country.<sup>534</sup>

The words 'denationalize' and the phrase 'strengthen the hold of the British on this country' were unduly hard against the Christians of whom Dr. Ambedkar spoke with a degree of sympathy and tenderness. This is surprising. To examine this text we need to examine its source. Vasant Moon gives the context of this text in the paragraph preceding the text in the Volume-17.1 of Dr. Ambedkar's *Writings and Speeches*:

Regarding conversion, "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, consulted his colleagues from different provinces in the matter of choosing the proper religion for conversion. He had now decided to embrace Sikhism. His friends and colleagues felt that Dr. Ambedkar should seek the support of the Hindu Sabha leaders in their conversion to Sikhism; for the Hindu Sabha leaders believed that Sikhism was not an alien religion. It was an off-spring of Hinduism and therefore the Sikhs and the Hindus intermarried and the Sikhs were allowed to be members of the Hindu Mahasabha. Accordingly, Dr. Moonje, the spokesman of the Hindu Mahasabha was invited to Bombay, in the presence of two other friends; Dr. Ambedkar had a talk with Dr. Moonje at Rajgriha, on June 18, 1936, at half past-seven that night. Dr. Ambedkar cleared all issues and had a free talk with Dr. Moonje. Next day the *purport* of Dr. Ambedkar's views was *reduced to a statement* and was given to Dr. Moonje who approved it personally.<sup>535</sup> (emphasis added)

What has been published above is questionable for various reasons. Firstly, it is not known who wrote out this purport of Dr. Ambedkar's views for the press release. The matter was approved by Moonje but it is improbable that it was presented to Dr. Ambedkar for a preview. Secondly, how much of this text is accurate recording of the actual words uttered by Dr. Ambedkar cannot be determined for it appears that Dr. Ambedkar did not respond to this press release. It is possible that some words

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<sup>534</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus should not be Indifferent to Conversion of Depressed Classes' (1936) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-1 Mumbai, 2003, p. 241

<sup>535</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus should not be Indifferent' (1936), p. 239.



were fed into the mouth of Dr. Ambedkar by the writer. Thirdly, the statement could have been composed by a person with a degree of prejudice against Christians. Fourthly, Dr. Ambedkar had criticized Christians of tolerating caste but never being denationalized. Here it appears as a new word in Dr. Ambedkar's vocabulary in the sphere of his dealings with Christianity. This word does not fit into the normal 'Ambedkar language'. Fifthly, this was not a recording of the whole conversation but a reduction. In other words it is only the essence of what was discussed for which new words were used to reduce the length of the statements. Sixthly, the word 'denationalize' and the phrase 'strengthening the hold of the British' are in line with the nationalist ideology of the Hindus. Juxtaposing Christianity with Islam in this text betrays a similar colour of prejudice. Even Moonji, the Hindu Mahasabha representative, was of the view it was Muslims not Christians who needed to be checked. This is evident in the 'formula for amicable settlement' on the question of conversion.<sup>536</sup> Seventhly, in the light of Dr. Ambedkar's statement<sup>537</sup> on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1938 reiterating the great impact of Jesus Christ on his mind, the reliability of the above 1936-text seems to be doubtful. As such this excerpt does not answer our question which we posed at the starting of this paragraph. Keeping this in view, the statement of the press-release weighs less in value and authenticity than the articles which Dr. Ambedkar had written himself. Accordingly it would be misleading to base conclusions on this text.

Now considering the question we had raised at the beginning of this section, obviously Dr. Ambedkar was unclear whether Christianity in India should be propagated or not. In one place he said, 'I want them to be strong and I want them to be strong because I see great dangers for them ahead.'<sup>538</sup> Yet earlier in another place when inquired of his conversion he said with uncertainty, 'I do not promote Islam or Christian religions to anybody as yet'.<sup>539</sup> We have already seen instances like this one indicating Dr. Ambedkar's ambiguity. In his article *The Condition of the Convert* he had expressed this dilemma at the end when he wrote, 'I do not know what Indian Christians will think of what I have said of the weaknesses which infect their life.'<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> The 'formula' was cited in a letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> June 1936 as a response to the Statement dated 19<sup>th</sup> June 1936. Both pieces of writings were approved by Moonji, the Hindu Mahasabha representative, who claimed that Dr. Ambedkar had given his nod after seeing the text. The wording of the 'formula' and the content of Moonje's letter is as follows:- "If Dr. Ambedkar ... and his followers were prepared to embrace Sikhism in preference to Islam and Christianity ... the Hindu Mahasabha will be prepared, in view of their having agreed to remain within the Hindu culture, to make an announcement that it will not object: 1. to the conversion of the Depressed Classes to Sikhism; 2. to the inclusion of the Neo-Sikhs in the list of the Scheduled Castes; and 3. to the enjoyment by the Depressed Classes of the political rights of the Poona pact..." Cf. 'Reactions on the Statement dated 19-6-1936 Issued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on Conversion' (1936), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-I, Appendix-X, p. 476.

<sup>537</sup> Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babsaheb*, 2007 p. 122.

<sup>538</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

<sup>539</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'I Cannot Sacrifice My Conscience' (1936) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17. Part-III. Mumbai: 2003, p. 105.

<sup>540</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

We have seen that the paradoxical nature of Christianity in India left Dr. Ambedkar in a dilemma. This resulted in his ambiguous attitude to Christians and uncertainty to recommend this religion for Dalits to embrace. Keeping in view that it is very difficult to say anything precise concerning Dr. Ambedkar's response to Christians, a more appropriate way would be to draw our attention to the findings of Dr. Ambedkar about Christianity.

## **7 Dr. Ambedkar's Findings**

Having deliberated on his view on Christianity, we will now consider three specific shortcomings of the Indian Christians that Dr. Ambedkar had identified. He found that,

1. Christians were socially mild.
2. Christians were politically not influential.
3. Christians were economically weak.

One reason for these inadequacies was that Dalit Christians lacked sufficient self confidence unlike the nationalists who had not espoused Christianity. This mental attitude made it particularly difficult for them to aggressively demand their rights from the government or to challenge the casteist culture. But this should be balanced with the fact that Dalits for centuries had been silenced and reduced to subservience. Here Mahatma Gandhi's 1932-fast is an example of this irony. Even in emaciated condition he was adequately powerful to extract a promise from the reluctant untouchable leader.<sup>541</sup> Dr. Ambedkar had to give his word not do anything that would be detrimental to the interests of Hindus. In this case he was to withdraw his demand for separate electorate of untouchables and not to espouse a religion of non-Indian origin, whether Christian or otherwise. This exemplifies the helplessness of Dalits.

Admittedly conversion to Christianity did not change the condition of the Dalit Christians as far as their power equation with the privileged castes was concerned. Their lack of political influence was no good for converts from Dalit communities, because Christians neither could ensure to protect their civil liberties, nor did they possess the capacity to implement social change through proper legislatures. The articulation and execution of such measures cannot be possible without political power. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of observation he found that the Indian Christians had not politically mobilized themselves to be influential.

The Indian Christians need two things. The first thing they want is the safeguarding of their civil liberties. The second thing they want is ways and means for their economic uplift. I cannot stop to discuss these needs in all their details. All I wish to

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<sup>541</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 212.

point out is that this is a great desideratum in the social work the Christian Missions are doing in India.<sup>542</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that under this advice there was another objective in his mind. It was to target the idea of salvation which instead of offering hope to Dalits in this world offered them heaven after death. So let us rapidly see some doctrines associated with Christian idea of salvation. The theologians have used the word atonement to explain what God did through Christ to save the sinful human beings. The earliest one was the Ransom theory of Irenaeus.<sup>543</sup> He explained that God saved us from satanic captivity by paying the price of his Son's life as a ransom. The idea is not so much liberation of human beings but of God's way to meet the requirement of justice. What Athanasius had to comment on the death of Christ was even more heaven bound. He said, '...being joined with the Word from heaven, we may be carried up with him into heaven'<sup>544</sup>. Salvation being understood as human captivity to Satan, the liberation was brought when God in Christ befuddled Satan. This became known as the Mousetrap theory, which was used cleverly by Augustine, 'the Devil jumped for joy when Christ died; and by the very death of Christ the Devil was overcome: he took, as it were, the bait in the mousetrap'<sup>545</sup>. However, the idea of being unbound from devil's clutch had little to do with social emancipation. Another idea associated with salvation was the theory of Satisfaction introduced by Anselm and refined by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>546</sup> It helped to understand the offer of divine pardon for sins which was impossible without Christ satisfying God's just demand on the cross. It must be admitted that this understanding of salvation interiorly encouraged a believer but had little to do with his/her social environment. On the other hand Schleiermacher (1834) instead of individual, focused on the community of faith as significant for salvation.<sup>547</sup> Yet he did not conceive the community as a mobilized force for action. In more recent times the theory of Substitution to explain the mechanics of salvation has become popular.<sup>548</sup> James Packer (1973) became the latest expounder of it. This doctrine emphasized the standing of a person as justified before God, as one whose penalty was paid by Christ. It was assumed in all these theories of atonement that only in the eternal heavenly life its fruition will be experienced. Obviously these doctrines do little to change a Dalit's standing in the society.

Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the doctrine of salvation has been a cause for the Christians to develop an otherworldly attitude with an added disinterest for

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<sup>542</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 453.

<sup>543</sup> *The Christian Theology Reader*. Alister E McGrath (Ed) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2001, p. 328.

<sup>544</sup> *Theology Reader*. p. 333.

<sup>545</sup> *Theology Reader*. p. 338.

<sup>546</sup> *Theology Reader*. p. 346.

<sup>547</sup> *Theology Reader*. p. 358.

<sup>548</sup> *Theology Reader*. p. 374.

social change or reform. But one should also look at the circumstances in which the gospel was preached to the Indians. Firstly the missionaries who preached the gospel were deeply influenced by pietism which had its moorings in the University of Halle.<sup>549</sup> Their theology had encouraged a pious belief among the converts that Christians belong to a Kingdom of another world.<sup>550</sup> In their perspective good works did not contribute to a person's salvation.<sup>551</sup> Secondly, the missionaries themselves had perceived caste merely as a social arrangement albeit unequal like the European classes. They did not consider it a matter of urgency to change this social arrangement.<sup>552</sup> Thirdly, the converts in addition to their social alienation like other Dalits were poor and politically weak. They passively waited for their salvation from heaven and help from the mission.<sup>553</sup> It was not surprising that they were inept to initiate a movement for social change or reform either in the larger society or within the Christian community.<sup>554</sup> Instead, they had accommodated the caste system in their social life. In this sense Christians lacked aggressiveness for social change and they failed to implement egalitarianism which was *the ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* as propounded in their religion.

Fortunately, despite the otherworldly teaching of the missionaries which created a disinterest in the Christians to engage in social reform, the gospel has a clear accent for emancipation of the oppressed people. The Song of Mary is a case in point.<sup>555</sup> Its subversive spirit aims at deliverance of the lowly and the subjugated people. For instance text like, 'God has brought down the rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble; he has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty' clearly brings this before us (Luke 1.52-53).

Different from what the magnificat inspires, the good works undertaken by the missionaries were charity and relief for the poor. Scarcely any efforts were made for establishing an egalitarian society over and against a caste based society. Deprived of equal treatment and equal opportunity in the society at large, the converts of the scheduled castes became dependent on the mission services. Such a condition, we could reckon with Dr. Ambedkar, was unsatisfactory. In the mid-1930s when on these lines he wrote his response to the Indian Christians, he expressed his disappointment with the low turnover of Indians to Christianity. He would have appreciated a stronger percentage of Christians in the general population to accomplish social changes on the line of *justice* and *utility*. He felt that if the funds for

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<sup>549</sup> James Massey. *Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality*. New Delhi: ISPCK. 1996, p. 66.

<sup>550</sup> Massey. *Roots of Dalit History*. p.73.

<sup>551</sup> Massey. *Roots of Dalit History*. p. 67.

<sup>552</sup> Massey. *Roots of Dalit History*. p. 66.

<sup>553</sup> John Webster. *The Dalit Christians: A History*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 192.

<sup>554</sup> Webster. *The Dalit Christians*. pp. 186-187.

<sup>555</sup> Gospel of Luke 2. 47-55 also known as The Magnificat.

evangelizing the privileged castes were used for mobilizing Dalits, they would have swelled the percentage of Christians. He observed that,

[T]he money and energy spent by the Christian missions on education and medical relief is misapplied and do not help the Indian Christians.<sup>556</sup>

It is very interesting to note that although Dr. Ambedkar who in 1932 had dropped the option of going over to the Christian fold, as Bishop Picket had suggested, was still interested in them. But now at a distance he could objectively observe the condition of the converts. This is reflected in his perplexity with the approach adopted by Christian missions in India. They, in order to convince the privileged section of the society of the gospel, had kept aloof from social reform. At the same time not to preach the gospel to the privileged sections by being exclusive attentive to Dalits was difficult to square with gospel injunction to make disciple of all nations. However, as far as Dr. Ambedkar was concerned Christianity was not his choice.

We have seen that Dr. Ambedkar's thinking was from the perspective of the emancipation of Dalits. His article *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* in 1946 exemplifies this.<sup>557</sup> But in his writings he did not adequately focus on it. Dr. Ambedkar having realized the biblical basis of justice could have walked further on the turf of Christian philosophy where he would have realized the significance of emancipation, both interiorly and socially for Dalits. One thing that Dr. Ambedkar did not comment on was on the resurrection of Christ from the dead, which of all events has been a stumbling block for the Indians to embrace Christianity. Resurrection is the victorious emancipation from all that brings death. Either Dr. Ambedkar was unaware of this doctrine or he chose to ignore this subject altogether. Knowing his wide scholarship the former is untenable but that he chose the latter may be due to various reasons. Either he found it difficult to fit this belief within his rational scheme or perhaps he had postponed his comments for an appropriate time, in case he embraced Christianity, or if he found it incredible and irrelevant.

Nonetheless, it will be apt to recall Dr. Ambedkar's most moving conclusion at the end of his article on Christians, *The Condition of the Convert*. He had realized the utility of Christianity for Dalits which was evident in their conversion to it. He expressed his deep interest for Christians, that he was their friend and that he wanted them to be aware of their weaknesses in order to overcome them. He wrote,

I am deeply interested in the Indian Christians because a large majority of them are drawn from the Untouchable classes. My comments are those of a friend. They are not strictures of an adversary. I have drawn attention to their weaknesses because I

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<sup>556</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 453.

<sup>557</sup> idem *Writing and Speeches* Vol-9. p. 388.

want them to be strong and I want them to be strong because I see great dangers for them ahead. They have to reckon with the scarcely veiled hostility of Mr. Gandhi to Christianity taking roots in the Indian social structure. But they have also to reckon with militant Hinduism masquerading as Indian Nationalism.<sup>558</sup>

For none else did Dr. Ambedkar wrote a postscript with a touch of affection and tenderness as this. Although he on no occasion spared them wherever he found them at fault, this addendum demonstrates his inclination to Christianity. Yet he could not decide to opt for Christianity as a home for his Dalit community.

## 8 Conclusion

IT IS NAIVE TO SAY THAT DR. AMBEDKAR WAS ATTRACTED TO CHRISTIANITY but not to Christians. The fact as it has come out in our study above is that he was ambiguous. He felt simultaneously repelled and attracted both by this religion and to its adherents. But this was not something for which Dr. Ambedkar would have apologized. He appreciated the Christian values of equality, freedom and kinship. In places when he unfavourably commented, it was strictly on the lines of what he understood a good religion to be. For instance he believed that a good religion should be just and rational. For that reason he could not appreciate Christ's divinity.<sup>559</sup> This only shows that it is difficult for us to put him neatly in a box.

We have earlier studied his views on the unsuitability of Christianity for Dalits, namely – social, political and economic inadequacies. Being powerlessness in these areas made them incapable to negotiate justice. For Dr. Ambedkar these were great drawbacks of the Christian community. He reasoned that a disjointed community would be incapable to mobilize the broken people to demand civil liberties for themselves which would enable them to repossess their *selfhood*. The question once again before Dr. Ambedkar was this, if Christianity was unsuitable for the Dalits then what was the other option?

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<sup>558</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), p. 476.

<sup>559</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 215.

## Chapter Seven

### Response to Sikhs

#### 1. Introduction

Despite Dr. Ambedkar's declaration of 13<sup>th</sup> October 1935 at a Conference at Yeola to convert to an egalitarian religion, he did not state what religion he, along with his community, were going to adopt.<sup>560</sup> In response to this, some religious leaders approached Dr. Ambedkar. One among these was Sardar Dalip Singh Doabia, Vice-President of the Golden Temple Managing Committee. In his telegram to Dr. Ambedkar he wrote that, "The Sikh religion is monotheistic and all-loving and provides for equal treatment of all its adherents."<sup>561</sup> Obviously this was an idealistic picture. Perhaps it was true that the Sikhs had accepted strict equality at the time when their religion was born. The obvious evidence of this is the tradition of *langar* or the community meal. But it soon became clear to Dr. Ambedkar that there were serious difficulties in the contemporary Sikh tradition. Despite his desire to assimilate the *Mahars* into an egalitarian and influential community he knew that converting to a religion merely because it had an egalitarian message was being naive.<sup>562</sup> He needed to give serious thought to the Sikh tradition if he were to adopt it along with his people.

We shall consider whether to join it or not just as we may consider whether or not to join any other sect, but such a sect must be of a living religion... I think that the Harijan community should be completely absorbed into some powerful community. It has decided not to join the Arya Samaj. We shall consider the question of joining the Sikh religion.<sup>563</sup>

So here we can see Dr. Ambedkar's expectations of a religion suitable for Dalits. In his view Dalits had to be assimilated in a religion where social equality matched with other features like being influential, contemporaneous and commanding a global adherence. After the *Yeola* declaration, Dr. Ambedkar with a view to convert looked seriously to Sikhism.<sup>564</sup> A reason for preferring Sikhism was that it was an indigenous religion. His presence in the Sikh *bhajan* on January 13, 1936 and in a Sikh Mission Conference in mid April 1956 indicates this.<sup>565</sup> Though in writing he left

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<sup>560</sup> Moon. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. p. 98.

<sup>561</sup> Paradkar. B.A.M. 'The Religious Quest of Ambedkar' in *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*. T.S. Wilkinson and M.M.Thomas (eds). MaDr.as: Christian Literature Society, 1972, p.55.

<sup>562</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove the Basis of 'Smriti' Religion' (1935), p. 237.

<sup>563</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove the Basis of 'Smriti' Religion' (1935) Idem, p. 237. This is from the gist of an interview Dr. Ambedkar had with the Nasik Progressive Hindus at a meeting held on October 26, 1935.

<sup>564</sup> Moon. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. p. 99.

<sup>565</sup> K. David Pandyan. Dr.. B.R. Ambedkar and *The Dynamics of Neo-Buddhism*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009, p. 90.

very little of his thoughts on Sikhism, it is nonetheless obvious from what the evidence suggests that he took definite steps to assess and weigh this alternative before taking any decision. Unfortunately unlike the two Christian leaders Bishop V.S. Azariah and Bishop W.J. Pickett who left the records of their interaction with Dr. Ambedkar in writing, no information with such details are available from Sikh leaders to help us.<sup>566</sup> Therefore, I found no adequate solutions to two puzzling issues which I bring to attention. The first is, why at this stage, he suddenly expressed an interest to preserve the Hindu culture?<sup>567</sup> And the second is this; if he perceived Sikhism adequately Indian then what stopped him short in embracing it? He has left us with an incomplete response after his abrupt break with the Sikhs. Therefore, it is admitted that along with my findings the answers of these queries are supplemented with my conjectural views as well. But before proceeding with our study of Dr. Ambedkar's response to the Sikhs, we will briefly look at some features of the Sikh religion.

## 2. The Gurus and their Disciples

Beginning its nurture in Guru Nanak's (1469-1539) teachings, Sikhism evolved over a period of two centuries. Nanak, who laid the foundations of the Sikh<sup>568</sup> community, came to be regarded as the first in the series of ten Gurus.<sup>569</sup> For our purpose we need not describe the life and works of every Guru here. What, however, needs to be noted is that the religious milieu of Sikhism's evolution was influenced by the *bhakti* or devotional movement (C.E. 1400-1650)<sup>570</sup> which had reached its climax at that time. The four salient features of *bhakti* movement were firstly, emphasis on the local language to express one's devotion, secondly, discounting caste discriminations, thirdly, abandoning rituals and ceremonies and fourthly, emphasis on ethical behaviour and purity of heart.<sup>571</sup> The Sikh community was marked by these features, though over a period of time they developed their own rituals.

However, we must draw our attention to the five historical turns that shaped the genius of the Sikh religion which, as I see them, were the practical derivations of the *bhakti* tradition.

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<sup>566</sup> For more information read Arthur G. Mcphee. *Road to Delhi: Bishop J Waskom Pickett Remembered. 1890-1981*. Bangalore. SAIACS Press, 2005.

<sup>567</sup> B. R. Ambedkar. 'Conversion Movement Sans Selfish Motive' (1936) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-I, Mumbai: 2003, p. 253.

<sup>568</sup> 'Sikh' literally means 'learner' or 'disciple'. W.H. McLeod *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Auckland: Graphic Educational Publications, 1968, p. 7.

<sup>569</sup> James Massey. *The Doctrine of Ultimate Reality in Sikh Religion: A Study of Guru Nanak's Hymns in the Adi Granth*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991, p. 5. Other nine successive Gurus were Angad (C.E. 1539-1552), Amar Das (C.E. 1552-74), Ram Das (C.E. 1574-81), Arjan (C.E. 1581-1606), Hargovind (C.E. 1606-44), Har Rai (C.E. 1644-61), Har Kishan (C.E. 1661-64), Tegh Bahadur (C.E. 1664-75), and Gobind Singh (C.E. 1675-1708).

<sup>570</sup> James Massey. *A Contemporary Look at Sikh Religion: Essays on Scripture, Identity, Creation, Spirituality, Charity and Interfaith Dialogue*. New Delhi: CDS & Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2010, p. 47.

<sup>571</sup> Massey. *A Contemporary Look at Sikh Religion*. p. 2.



1. Succession of *Gurus* was not family inheritance.
2. Eating together aimed to abolish untouchability.
3. Solidarity with all victims of injustice irrespective of religion.
4. Importance of guarding one's dignity.
5. Education aimed to develop intellectual capacity.

So the important elements here are emphasis of leadership, kinship, equality, solidarity, dignity and education. These were useful for the restoration of *selfhood* which made Sikhism suitable for Dalits. Sociologists like Clarence McMullen have observed that 'Guru Nanak's teaching was distinguished from those of contemporary *bhaktas* and *sants*, by its strong emphasis on the reality of the world and ... rejection of renunciation and celibacy'.<sup>572</sup> With all these aspects Sikhism arose as an indigenous religion in the sense that its founders and origin were in India. Its scripture was in an Indian language and its first adherents were Indians. This homebound feature was underscored by Dr. Ambedkar as he weighed the viability of this religion.

### 2.1 No Blood Heirs

The Sikhs began to flourish as a distinct community due to the succession of Gurus. Guru Nanak appointed Lehana (1539-52 C.E.), who he renamed Angad or 'limb', as the Guru over the Sikhs after him. Lehana was not his son. The significance was that succession was not to be restricted to the sons of the reigning Guru. Court describes this the event in his English translation, "Before his name was Lehana, but now as I have pressed my body and bestowed on him the power of the adoration of God, therefore his name is called Guru Angad". Then his disciples petitioned: "O Guru! Agreeably to your orders, we will regard him as our Guru, but what shall we regard them as, who are your sons?" Then Nanak replied, "God himself will take care of them, it is no concern of yours; do you place the worship and offerings of the Guru before him, who had brought himself into the way of God with all his body and soul".<sup>573</sup> Nonetheless, many Gurus later on did choose their successors from among their sons. However, the principle that *Guruship* was not a family inheritance was established right at the beginning.<sup>574</sup> The soundness of this rule was to restrict

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<sup>572</sup> Osmund Clarence McMullen. *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Sikhs in Rural Punjab*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989, p. 31.

<sup>573</sup> History of the Sikhs or *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*,. (Translated by Major Henry Court). Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1888, p. 12-13.

<sup>574</sup> From the historical narrative of the Sikhs it seems that at the beginning the community was not aggressive. A translation of a story by Court suggests how Guru Amardas taught this Sikhs the attitude of patience, 'when after the death of Angad, Amardas came and lived in Gobindwal, the Musalmans, who bore enmity towards him, began to afflict him much, still he never took any notice, but made his request to God, "O Lord, do thou direct their hearts." One day, when his disciples, having filled some pots with water, were bringing it for him to cook, with, then a lot of Musalman boys, shooting at them with pellet bows, broke the pots to pieces. His disciples came and said, "O Guru! The Turks are always breaking our pots, what remedy shall we apply for this?" the Guru with much forbearance gave reply, "From today, do you bring water in water bags, for they

privileged families from monopolizing power of governance over their community. This meant that the possibility of developing leadership and gaining ascendancy to the highest office was equally open to all the adherents of the Sikh gurus.

## 2.2 Disciples and Equal

Guru Amar Das (1552-74) succeeded Guru Angad. The Sikh community was strengthened by his strong organizing capabilities. This was evident in his success of setting up twenty two centers, appointing preachers, commissioning Sikh men and women as missionaries. It was his original idea to make *langar* or 'community kitchens' the hallmark of the Sikh community where meal from the common kitchen was served to all who ate together in fellowship. Such *langars* were organized as a service unit at the *Gurudwara* or the Sikh temples.<sup>575</sup> Reinforcement of social cohesiveness was brought about by the participation of non-clerical caDr.es in these common meals. The result of eating together was that discriminatory practices like untouchability were halted among the Sikh adherents.

Another point that must be underscored is that the Gurus, far from being aggressive, were engaged in composing sacred verses which were incorporated in the *Adi Granth Sahib*.<sup>576</sup> Later Guru Arjan (1581-1606) compiled the sacred canon of the compositions attributed to Nanak and other gurus. He affixed the names of other devotees like *Kabir*, *Ramananda*, *Dhana Bhagat*, *Nam Deo* and *Raidas* whose compositions were incorporated in the Holy Book.<sup>577</sup> This Book became the pivot of the Sikh religious identity and eventually after the tenth Guru it took the place of a living Guru. Under its authority all Sikhs stand equally.

## 2.3 Vicarious in Death

The martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur (1621-75) under the severe persecutions in the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb is an example of the sacrificial solidarity of the Guru with the oppressed people. The Guru was imprisoned for his advocacy of

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cannot be broken with pellet bows." The Sikhs acted accordingly, but the Musalmans did not alter their behaviour. When the Sikhs began to bring water in bags, they split the bags with arrows. The Sikhs again pointed this out to the Guru; and the Guru again answered, "O brother Sikhs! Do you bring water in brass pots." The Sikhs acted agreeably to this word, but again the Musalmans, throwing bricks, began to smash the pots. In short, although the Musalmans harassed Baba Amardas and his disciples much, still he never used any harsh words towards them, but in his heart prayed for their welfare, for he considered all grief and happiness as coming from God. When his disciples addressed him saying, "O Guru! How long shall we bear the tyranny of the Musalmans?", then he answered, "Bear them all your life, for to take revenge is not the religion of the good; moreover remember that there is no penance equal to patience; and there is no happiness equal to forbearance, and no sin greater than covetousness, and no duty greater than mercy, and no weapon better than clemency." On hearing this, all his disciples became quiet' Cf. *History of the Sikhs or Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*,. (Translated by Major Henry Court). Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1888, p. 17-18.

<sup>575</sup> Massey. *A Contemporary Look at Sikh Religion* p. 49.

<sup>576</sup> The holy book of the Sikhs.

<sup>577</sup> He gave these to *Bhai Gurdas* to transcribe them in Gurmukhi script. He also marked the verses composed by Nanak to distinguish them from other compositions. He did this by collecting Nanak's composition under the first section of the book i.e. *Pahila Mahala*, similarly for the second Guru under the Second *Mahala* and so on. Cf. *History of the Sikhs or Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*,. p. 21.

those Hindus who were being oppressed by Sher Afghan, then the Governor of Kashmir.<sup>578</sup> In this way his sufferings in prison and his death were vicarious.<sup>579</sup> From the prison he wrote to his son Govind Singh in Anandpur, 'the Musalmans have made me very helpless...My power is broken, and I am bound in chains, and can devise no means to escape; agreeably to Nanak's saying, now my help lies with God only.'<sup>580</sup> At last the Guru, who wanted relief from bondage and persecutions, and to preserve his honour from further humiliation, ordered his disciple to behead him in the prison.<sup>581</sup> This account of the tragic story involves an interesting but important end brought by Dalits.

The Guru, having narrated to him many proofs, at last made him to agree to cut off his head. When the morning broke, then the Guru first bathed, and having repeated the Japji, placed his head on the ground to do obeisance to his Lord; and then gave a sign, saying, "O Sikh! Fulfil the command." That Sikh gave a blow with his sword and separated his head. When the news reached Govind Singh in Anandpur of the death of the Guru, then he became very afflicted (*sic!* affected); but afterwards, having accepted it as the decree of God, said to his sweepers, "Do you, by some means, bring the body of the Guru here, for if we sent any men of high birth, or one of our disciples (Sikhs) then they would not be able to get into the royal prison; but you are poor people, and under the pretence of sweeping, can go in, and accomplish this business." They at once went to Dilli, and, having hid his body in a cart of grass, brought it to Anandpur. Govind Singh was much pleased with them; moreover that day, having blessed them, he said, "From today, you are the sons of the Guru, and will be called Rangharets".<sup>582</sup> They, who, in the present day are called Majabi Sikhs in the Punjab, are all their descendents.<sup>583</sup> The body was burnt in Anandpur with much joy and rejoicing, a very large huge mausoleum was erected there, and its name had become known, as the shrine of Teg Bahadur. The head of the Guru which had remained in Dilli, that head the Sikhs burnt there, and the tomb, which was erected over it, became known by the name of Sisganj (Head Heap).<sup>584</sup>

The reference here to "sweepers" and "poor people" is important. Clearly it refers to Dalit admirers of the Guru. This role makes them equal sharers of the Sikh tradition

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<sup>578</sup> Kushwant Singh contends that the Sikh version which is a more reliable source as it was based on the contemporary sources of its times narrates how 'a delegation of Kashmir Brahmins had approached the Guru to help them out of their predicament who apparently were ordered to accept conversion to Islam. The story maintains that the Guru told them to tell the Mughal authorities that 'if Teg Bahadur would accept conversion they would follow his example.' When the Guru was summoned to Delhi he refused to renounce his faith and was beheaded. Cf. Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1: 1469-1839*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 72

<sup>579</sup> Sher Singh. *Evolution of Sikh Faith and Its Followers*. Amritsar: A tract published by Dharam Prachar Committee. Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>580</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*. p. 37.

<sup>581</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*. p. 38.

<sup>582</sup> Court explains the meaning in the footnotes that "The Ranghars, or Musalman Rajputs, are considered a very brave race of men; hence rangareta implies "brave heroes"". Cf. *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia* [1888] Pg. 38

<sup>583</sup> Also read Teja Singh. *Sikhism: Its Ideals And Institutions*. Kolkata: Longmans Green & Co., Ltd., 1938, p. 89.

<sup>584</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*. p. 38.

along with the rest. However, an alternative version suggests Guru's death<sup>585</sup> as a martyr at the hands of the Muslim rulers during the reign of Aurangzeb.<sup>586</sup>

## 2.4 The Defenders of Dignity

After the death of Guru Teg Bahadur, his son Govind Singh (1666-1708) was enthroned as the tenth Guru of the Sikhs.<sup>587</sup> His approach was remarkably different from his predecessors. He brought an assertive nature to a persecuted community. He developed the military tradition of the Sikhs and founded the *Khalsa* movement. Khalsa means the "unsullied ones". We shall take up this in our discussion later. It must be noted that this was a significant move from pacifism to assertion.<sup>588</sup> But it highlights the importance to defend one's dignity under the threat of dispossession by dominant political powers and social forces.

## 2.5 The Learned Faithful

Guru Gobind Singh was also eager to give a firm scholarly support for his movement. His twelve years at Anandpur were full of intellectual activity. He sent five competent students to Varanasi both to learn Sanskrit and also the Hindu religious texts. His aim probably was to understand what earlier Gurus had written, because their writings had reference to Hindu mythologies and philosophy. These five founded the *nirmala* or the school of Sikh theologians.<sup>589</sup> This brought enrichment to the intellectual discipline of the community. It is very interesting to note that like the Hindu *brahmacharies*, the *nirmalas* too remained single; they wore white clothes and were vegetarians. Their syllabus commenced with Sanskrit and the study of the *Vedas*, eventually leading up to the study of the writings of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>590</sup> The significance of this lies in affirming classical Indian roots within Sikhism, which in Dr. Ambedkar's view made Sikhism a religion within the indigenous cultural category. Guru Gobind's activity at Anandpur included the production of lyrics celebrating the heroic feats of the brave people. This at one level

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<sup>585</sup> The other version holds that *Guru Teg Bahadur* was put to death in Delhi. Kushwant Singh notes, 'Ratan Singh Bhangu in his *Pracin Panth Prakas* maintains that on the Guru's refusal to accept Islam the Chief Kazi asked him to exhibit some of the miraculous powers he was supposed to possess. There upon the Guru wrote something on a piece of paper and tied it with a string around his neck. This, he said, would prevent the executioner from cutting off his head. When the Guru's head was severed, the piece of paper was opened. It read: *Sis diya par sirr na diya*—I gave my head but not my secret.' Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1: 1469-1839*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 71.

<sup>586</sup> Loehlin writes that 'On November 11, 1675 Guru Teg Bahadur was publically beheaded in the Chandni Chauk of Delhi, the second Guru to suffer martyrdom at the hands of Muslim rulers.' Cf. C.H. Loehlin. *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Brotherhood*. Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1971, p. 3.

<sup>587</sup> A Kushwant Singh point out that at the site of the execution in Chandini Chowk of Delhi, *Sis Ganj Guruwara* was erected. It is unlikely that the site of the cremation of the body of Guru Teg Bahadur could have been Anandpur; rather it was at the vicinity of the Raisena Hill where the present building of the Parliament was constructed by the British. The *Rikab Ganj Gurudwara* marks this site. Cf. Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1: 1469-1839*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 71.

<sup>588</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1: 1469-1839*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 74

<sup>589</sup> *Nirmala* means the "unsullied ones".

<sup>590</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1*. p. 77.

was intellectually stimulating but at another level must have caused a martial fervor to prevail at the Sikh Court at Anandpur.<sup>591</sup>

### 3. Dr. Ambedkar's Declaration for Sikhism

Keeping in view that Dr. Ambedkar seriously considered converting to Sikhism along with his *Mahar* community it is reasonable to accept that he must have acquainted himself with its fundamentals. The composer of the press-release in *Times of India* July 24, 1936, stated that Dr. Ambedkar favoured the conversion of those affected by untouchability to Sikhism for three reasons: One, that it was Indian in culture; two, that it would be safe for the destiny of the country; and three, that it was good for the advancement of the country.<sup>592</sup> Clearly Sikhism offered a viable option to enable the Dalits to reclaim their *selfhood*. In this section we will spell out three contentions of this statement to explore how far Dr. Ambedkar subscribed to them. We will also bring forward some Sikh traditions that can provide an inspirational background to these contentions.

#### 3.1 Indian Roots

Dr. Ambedkar at this stage had come to take the aspect of culture seriously. It is, however, difficult to know what he exactly meant by culture but clearly it was not the caste system that he had in mind. In contrast to Islam and Christianity which had Arabic and western backgrounds, he regarded Sikhism culturally within the Hindu fold. It must be admitted that at this point Dr. Ambedkar is vague about culture. Whether culturally he regarded Hindu and Indian as different or synonymous is unclear. B.S. Moonje, then the President of the Hindu Mahasabha, wrote to Dr. Ambedkar a letter containing the formula which was *drawn* up on June 19, 1936 in Mumbai which underscores this element of culture.<sup>593</sup> The tone of this letter sounds like a deal that Moonje offered to Dr. Ambedkar. The deal was that the Hindu Mahasabha would withdraw its objection if Dr. Ambedkar decided to convert to Sikhism. Propagation of Sikhism was acceptable to the Hindu Mahasabha. The relevant excerpt of this letter is this,

If Dr. Ambedkar were to announce his decision that he and his followers are preparing to embrace Sikhism in preference to Islam and Christianity and that he shall honestly and sincerely co-operate with the Hindus and the Sikhs in propagating their culture and in counteracting the Muslim movement for drawing the Depressed Classes into the Muslim fold, the Hindu Mahasabha will be prepared, in view of their having to remain within the Hindu Culture, to make an announcement that it will not object 1) To the conversion of the Depressed Classes to Sikhism, 2) To the inclusion of the Neo-Sikhs in the list of the Scheduled Castes and 3) to the enjoyment

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<sup>591</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1*. p. 78.

<sup>592</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus Should not be Indifferent' (1936), pp. 240-241.

<sup>593</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus Should not be Indifferent' (1936), p.478.

by the Depressed Classes of the political rights of the Poona Pact by free competition between the Non-Sikhs Depressed Classes as provided under the Poona Pact.<sup>594</sup>

What we see here is that besides assessing a religion on the anvil of *utility* and *justice*, the dimension of culture also was added in the orbit of the standard especially in the context of India. This was a logical development as Dr. Ambedkar hammered out his understanding of religion to protect the *selfhood* of Dalits after conversion. Understandably, conversion at the scale that Dr. Ambedkar had perceived laid a vast responsibility personally on him. The action had to succeed in the first shot and no regrets could be entertained at any stage later. There also was perhaps a deep seated psychological need at this stage in Dr. Ambedkar's life, which the proponents of the *Mahasabha* had offered to meet. And that he "*fell*" for it is expressed in his own words,

Shankaracharya Dr. Kurtakoti, and other prominent Hindu leaders have favoured the idea of Untouchables embracing Sikhism. In fact, it is their leaders who have propagated the idea of Untouchables embracing Sikhism...and also prevailed on me to do so. I fell for the idea mainly because I too feel I have some responsibility towards the future of Hindu culture and civilization.<sup>595</sup>

Here Dr. Ambedkar brings before us a significant matter which he had never discussed before i.e. that he felt responsible like many others to preserve the Hindu culture and civilization. What exactly was on his mind when he wrote this is difficult to explain. The reason is that due to his incomplete response to Sikhism we have no clue to cross-check his thinking. Of what we can make out of it is clear that at this point of time Dr. Ambedkar stresses the relationship between culture and nationalism. In this respect he differs from communists and left-wing socialists who neglect the cultural aspect of existence. This has been also stressed by Don Schweiter who wrote that, 'the socialists only looked at people's wellbeing in terms of rights, income and freedom. They ignored people's interests in protecting their cultural roots, their inherited traditions and sense of belonging to a larger national entity'. In other words people's self-interest includes love for their cultural heritage and origin, a sense of patriotism and belonging to a larger mythic entity, such as a nation or people. Schweiter applies this to explain the relative success of extreme nationalistic ideologies like *Hindutva* by appealing to people's need to belong to a wider social sphere.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reaction to the Statement' (1936), Idem *Writings and Speeches*. Vol-17. Part-I. Mumbai: 2003, p. 476.

<sup>595</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Conversion Movement Sans Selfish Motive' (1936), p. 253.

<sup>596</sup> Don Schweiter. 'The Messianic Vocation Of Dalit Christians' in *Transforming Praxis: God, Community, Community and Church: Essays in Honour of Dr. I John Mohan Razu*. (Editor: C.I.David Joy). New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, p. 67-68.

So we can see that Dr. Ambedkar not only assessed religion on the anvil of *utility* and *justice* but also gave thought to culture. One way to understand Dr. Ambedkar's stand in this area is to differentiate the Hindu religion from the Hindu civilization. Although Dr. Ambedkar was intensely opposed to the former, he did want to reform and preserve the latter. Towards this end he found in Sikhism a casteless Indian culture. This distinction can help us to understand his interest in the Sikhism, rather than Christianity. Had Dr. Ambedkar ventured to write down his reflections on cultural significance of Sikhism, he would have drawn his inspiration from the tradition of *Khalsa* in the Sikh community. So let us in the line of his thinking draw this connection.

It is known that Guru Gobind founded the order of the *Khalsa*. The aim of this was to continue his mission. In 1699 he called his disciples to collect for a festival on the *Baisakh* at Anandpur. What happened after the morning worship is described in *Sikkhan De Raj Di Vikhia* as following,

The Guru having called all those assembled said, "I require the head of one man; let him, who love his Guru, give his head to me." On hearing this, most of the people ran away, and the sincerity of many was shattered; but amongst them all, five disciples, getting up, said: "O true king! Our heads are present; cut them off when you please." Of these five, the name of one was Dharm Singh, of the second Sukha Singh, of the third Daya Singh, of the fourth Himmat Singh, and of the fifth Mukhan Singh. The Guru, having taken these five into a room<sup>597</sup>, began to say: "O beloved! I have been much pleased with your faith and sincerely, for you have not refused to give your heads in the name of the Guru; come now, I will baptize you in the true religion." Then, having, caused these five to bathe, he seated them together, and then, having dissolved some sweetmeats, in water, and stirred it up with a knife, and having read some verses composed by himself, which are written in the book called *Akal Ustat* (or immortal praise) , he gave them some of that Sharbat to drink and put some on their heads, and what was left, he sprinkled on their bodies, and then, patting them with his own hands, called out with a loud voice and said, "Say O sect of the *Wah Guru* (God), 'Victory be to the Lord (*Wah Guru*).'" Then having baptized those five, he was himself afterwards was baptized in the same way; and then said to them, "Whoever is my disciple will always keep five things, the first letter of the names of which is K; namely *kes* (hair), *kangha* (comb), *karad* (knife), *kirpan* (sword)

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<sup>597</sup> It is said that Guru Gobind after taking the first volunteer went into the tent, returning to the assembly with a blood dripping sword in his hand demanded another volunteer, he repeated this four times amidst a horrified crowd till he got five volunteers hence the term *panj pyare* was attributed to them. After the fifth volunteer he brought them all out before the assembly also the slain lamb in whose blood the sword was daubed. Cf. Sabu Mathai Kathettu. *The Sikh Community and the Gospel: An Assessment of Christian Ministry in Punjab*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2009, p.23.

and *kachh* (short breeches); and he who shall leave off wearing any of these things, he shall not be my disciple (Sikh)".<sup>598</sup>

This event set an example of the complete self-sacrifice expected from his Sikhs.<sup>599</sup> This significance lay, firstly, in the choice of the 'five beloved' from different Hindu castes. Probably one was a Brahmin, one a Kshatriya, the others from the lower castes. The act of drinking from one bowl signified their initiation into the casteless society of the *Khalsa*. Secondly, they were given one single family name, '*Singh*'. Kushwant Singh contends that this baptism signified their re-birth into the family of Gobind.<sup>600</sup> Thirdly, the *Khalsa* were to observe a code-of-conduct which included the refraining from cutting hair on any part of the body; refraining from using tobacco; consuming alcoholic drinks; eating animals which had been slaughtered by being bled to death, but only *jhatka* meat where the animal is killed by a single blow; and not to molest the person of Muslim women.<sup>601</sup> The initiation into the *Khalsa* even to this day requires an oath of allegiance to this Code-of-Conduct and the ceremony is ended by the acclamation of inspired wonder:

*Wah Guruji ka Khalsa (Wonderful pure-ones of the Guru)*  
*Wah Guruji ki Fateh (Wonderful victory of the Guru)*

Tradition like *Khalsa* brings out the most excellent side or character in a Sikh adherent. Dr. Ambedkar would agree that the association of the Dalits with a religious movement like this would motivate them to achieve the highest and the best. This tradition also resonated with the military services of the *Mahars*, the untouchable class in which Dr. Ambedkar was born.

### 3.2 National Loyalty

Along with culture Dr. Ambedkar was taking the interest of the country also into account. The movement of converting to another religion was not to be at the cost of national integration or by jeopardizing its security. He was careful to nurture national loyalty among his followers. So he desired a religion which not only would be egalitarian but would also foster national loyalty. For Dr. Ambedkar, Sikhism was providing a way out of this dilemma. It not only had originated in India but it also emphasized unity for its adherents. Although Dr. Ambedkar never articulated it, we see this in the traditions surrounding Guru Gobind Singh who is credited to have declared the *Adi Granth* as the eternal successor of Gurus. This ended controversies

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<sup>598</sup> *Sikhan de Raj di Vikhia*. p. 41.

<sup>599</sup> Kathettu. *The Sikh Community and the Gospel*, p.23.

<sup>600</sup> The words *Krit nas* means renunciation of their previous occupations, *Kul nas* means renunciation of their previous family ties, *darma nas* means rejection of their earlier creeds, *karm nas* means renunciation of all rituals except that sanctified by the Sikh religion. Cf. Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1*. p. 81.

<sup>601</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-1*. p. 81.



for headship causing enmities and divisions in the Sikh community.<sup>602</sup> Added to this he composed the *Dasam Granth* another *Granth* or 'sacred book' utilizing stories from Hindu literature. This is how Court describes it,

The Guru discovered that from reading the *Ad Granth* the Sikhs became feeble-hearted. Therefore (said the Guru), I myself will prepare such a *Granth* that the Sikhs from reading it will learn the art of ruling, the use of weapons, and other skills so that they will become fit for warfare; so from that very day he began the composition of a huge volume, and when it was completed on Sunday, on the eighth day of the new moon in the month of Bhadon 1753 Bikrami (1696) he named it "The *Granth Sahib* of the Tenth Sovereign".<sup>603</sup>

The *Dasam Granth* aimed to instill courage and passion in the hearts of the Sikhs to be soldier-saints to defend their faith, people and territory. Plainly this tradition has its advantages to promote patriotism. So we see that courage and passion which this instilled in the Sikh soldiers made the British regard them as suitable material for the armed forces. For this reason Dr. Ambedkar would have found this to be a good anchor for his community for two reasons. Firstly it would inspire courage to resist oppression of caste and gain dignity by joining military services. Secondly, it would reinforce patriotism. For these reasons Dr. Ambedkar would have desired his community of *Mahars* to be a part of this tradition. Pointing out how in the history of India, the unity of northern territories<sup>604</sup> was broken by invaders like Muhammad of Ghazni, Hakim,<sup>605</sup> and Nadir Shah (1738), had the Sikhs not defended their ground.

The whole of north India would have been severed from India had it not been for the check provided by rise of the Sikhs.<sup>606</sup>

In his line of reasoning that the destiny of India could only be bright if its defense was secure, Dr. Ambedkar reckoned that the history of Sikhs was never tainted with extra-territorial interests. Therefore, the conversion of Dalits to Sikhism would not jeopardize the destiny of the country. The known fact however was that the Sikh leaders, before the Independence of India in 1946, were deeply concerned about the fate of their community if the British granted the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. This demand would necessitate the partition of Punjab, inhabited by the Sikhs, between India and Pakistan. Master Tara Singh with the Sikh delegation having failed to impress the British for a united India in the interest of the Sikhs, demanded for a separate Sikh state with the right to join either India or Pakistan. Baldev Singh, a member of the Sikh delegation, described the Sikh state distinctly as

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<sup>602</sup> Loehlin. *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh*. p. 7.

<sup>603</sup> *Sikhan de Raj di Vikhia*, p.43.

<sup>604</sup> Stretching up to Kabul and Kandahar, now in Afghanistan.

<sup>605</sup> Emperor Akbar's brother.

<sup>606</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1945), p. 64.

*Khalistan*. Its territory would include divisions of Jullundur, Lahore, and Ambala to be administered under the Maharajah of Patiala.<sup>607</sup> Dr. Ambedkar could not have been ignorant of this but writing at that time i.e. before 1945, Dr. Ambedkar did not foresee the future developments in the Sikh politics. Within thirty years after his death the Sikh separatist movement of *Khalistan* had to be violently suppressed by the Indian Army in the 1984 Operation Bluestar. The Sikh leaders held the Congress government altogether responsible for the desecration of the Golden Temple and Akal Takht in this extreme action of the army. This resulted in mutiny of Sikh soldiers in the Indian army, unabated violence, assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Delhi by her Sikh bodyguard on October 31, 1984 resulting in an anti-Sikh pogrom as an aftermath.<sup>608</sup> The details of these events have had a sufficient coverage in the media and websites. The political contours of these events indicate that politically Sikhs are a vibrant community who fearlessly support or oppose State policies.

### 3.3 Political Vibrancy

After signing the Poona Pact in 1932, Dr. Ambedkar had to defend the conversion of Dalits to Sikhism against those who contended that “They cannot have it both ways. Either they are Hindus and enjoy the privileges under the Poona Pact, or they cease to be Hindus and forfeit those privileges”.<sup>609</sup> On the contrary Dr. Ambedkar asserted that Dalits, in order to contribute to the political advancement of the country, needed to be socially equal and liberated from the second class treatment of the dominant castes. His reasoning implied that political democracy entailed social democracy. In other words, unless people in their social life did not practice democracy i.e. equality and freedom, its procedures in political arena would be futile. For Dr. Ambedkar this social democracy in the form of egalitarianism of the Sikhs was foundational for their political liveliness. This was visible in their well organized community enabling them to demand their political rights and guard their civil liberties. Therefore, joining the Sikh community, in his line of reasoning, would help the Dalits to develop this political vibrancy.

Moreover Sikhs were not only politically well organized they also had a history of ruling Punjab. Here we should recall the achievement of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to forge Punjab into a strong kingdom under his control. He succeeded to repulse the Afghan attacks of Ahmed Shah Abdali’s successors, in 1805 he made Amritsar the centre of Sikh political power, in 1809 by the Treaty of Amritsar he made the river Sutlej, rather than Jamuna, as Anglo-Sikh border and he secured the British

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<sup>607</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Vol-II: 1839-2004*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 255.

<sup>608</sup> Kushwant Singh. pp. 366-367.

<sup>609</sup> B.R. Ambedkar: ‘Rights are Not Affected in the Event of Conversion’ (1936) *Idem Writings and Speeches Vol-17 Part-One* Mumbai: 2003, p. 245-246.

recognition of his sovereignty as 'Raja of Lahore'. Having made his kingdom free from the British interference for the next thirty years, he flourished as the Maharajah of Punjab. His reign was marked by security and order whereas other parts of India were in political chaos and war.<sup>610</sup> This experience had ingrained a strong political consciousness in the Sikhs. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of thinking we too can say that imbibing this consciousness would be crucial for Dalits to emancipate themselves from dependence on others.

#### **4. Dr. Ambedkar's Reasons**

It seemed to Dr. Ambedkar that the conversion of Dalits to Sikhism did present a real possibility for their progress. One reason for this was the egalitarianism of the Sikhs. Keeping in view that Islam and Christianity<sup>611</sup> also offered social equality to their adherents Dr. Ambedkar presented two more reasons for his inclination to Sikhism: one was related to the Poona Pact and the other was to do with the offer of military services. We will discuss all these features of Sikh community in this Section.

##### **4.1 Egalitarianism of Sikhism**

Although I have not found an explicit reference in Dr. Ambedkar's writings on the moral and social values of the Sikhs he certainly knew that social equality was basic to their religious ideal. Evidence of this is in Vasant Moon's biography of him. In reply to the telegram of the Vice-President of the organizing committee of the Golden Temple that 'Sikhism is monotheistic and there is equality' this is what Dr. Ambedkar wrote, 'I have Sikhism in mind'.<sup>612</sup> It is evident from this that Dr. Ambedkar knew that the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* in Sikh religion was egalitarianism. Therefore, their community was suitable for democracy which in the independent India had to shape social equity by the operation of one person one vote, and one vote one value.<sup>613</sup> A helpful support for Dr. Ambedkar can be taken from McMullen's book published in 1989, which is a useful source of sociological insights on this subject.<sup>614</sup> Here the suitability of Sikhism for the progress of Dalits is attested. The Sikh's explicitly affirm the reality of the world and the rejection of celibacy and asceticism.<sup>615</sup> Clearly Dr. Ambedkar had realized its suitability for Dalits and that he also was aware of the well known fact that the tribe of *Jats*<sup>616</sup> who

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<sup>610</sup> John Keay. *India: A History*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000, p. 411.

<sup>611</sup> B.R. Ambedkar: 'Hindus Should Not Be Indifferent To Conversion' (1936), p. 240.

<sup>612</sup> Moon. Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar*, p. 99.

<sup>613</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Closing Speech of the First Constituent Assembly of India' delivered in New Delhi in November 1949 in *Great Speeches of Modern India*. New Delhi: Random House India, 2007, p. 218.

<sup>614</sup> Clarence O. McMullen. *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Sikhs in Rural Punjab*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989, p.31.

<sup>615</sup> McMullen. *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Sikhs*. p. 31.

<sup>616</sup> McMullen. *Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Sikhs* p. 33.

originally were casteless humble peasants had benefitted by adopting Sikhism which gave them social status and equality.

#### **4.2 No Change in the Poona Pact**

To those who had expressed their apprehension at Dr. Ambedkar's resolve to convert with his community to Sikhism, he insisted that their fear was unreasonable. He refuted that conversion of depressed classes would entail the possibility of a demand for the increased number of reserved seats, other than those agreed in the Poona Pact. In his view such a demand would constitute a threat of a radical change in the Poona Pact. This would not be the case if Dalits would convert to Sikhism or for that matter to any other religion. He wrote,

The seats assigned to the depressed Classes under the Poona Pact will remain the same. The only change that will be introduced is that non-Sikh Depressed Classes and the Depressed Classes who have gone to Sikhism will both be free to compete.<sup>617</sup>

The point here was that the idea of surrendering the reserved seats of Dalits was unacceptable.<sup>618</sup> If those affected by untouchability were to convert to Islam or Christianity, they would still be entitled to the reserved seats because their political rights could not be stretched or curtailed by their allegiance to or rejection of a religion; rather their rights had originated and were rooted in the caste or the tribe in which they were born.

Their right to special representation is not made dependent upon their professing the Hindu religion. Their representation is made dependent upon their being members of certain castes and tribes.<sup>619</sup>

Clearly as the arrangement then stood conversion to Sikhism or to any other egalitarian religion would not have affected the political advantage of Dalits. The significance of this point should be noted in the light of the 1950-Presidential Ordinance which deprived the Christian and Muslims of the scheduled caste origin of their constitutional rights.

#### **4.3 Dignity of a Martial Race**

Dr. Ambedkar perceived the British neglect to include the Depressed Classes from joining the army as unjust. Dalits were not allowed in Infantry regiments but could serve in corps e.g. engineers, artillery and pioneer until around and during the Second World War. They could of course be absorbed as sweepers but not as regular

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<sup>617</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus Should not be Indifferent to Conversion' (1936), p. 242.

<sup>618</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus Should not be Indifferent to Conversion' (1936), p. 242.

<sup>619</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Hindus Should not be Indifferent to Conversion' (1936), p. 242.

soldiers.<sup>620</sup> This denied them a dignified career which could enhance their *selfhood* and social status. Tracing the martial history of the *Mahars* Dr. Ambedkar wrote of their valour in the British army. Therefore, the policy to discontinue their recruitment was unjust.

The Mahars have been a martial people. The army of the East India Company which successfully fought against the army of the Peshwa was recruited from the Mahars. The last battle between the Peshwa and the British was fought at Koregoan in Poona District. There is a column at Koregoan raised by the British to commemorate the battle. On the column are inscribed the names of the soldiers who fell in the battle on the side of the British. Nine out of ten names are Mahars. The recruitment of the Mahars continued upto 1892 and in all wars, the Mahars have proved their martial qualities. All of a sudden the recruitment of Mahars was stopped in 1892. Ever since the Mahars have nursed a grievance against the British Government for what they regarded as very ungrateful conduct. There is much justification for this grievance for there can be no doubt that without the help of the Untouchables the British would never have been able to conquer India.<sup>621</sup>

Perhaps Dr. Ambedkar would have viewed conversion to Sikhism as a way to rectify this wrong. We may note that a Mahar battalion was formed to fight during the War of 1914 but it was raised so late that it had no opportunity to go on the war service. Later, due to economic reasons it was disbanded after which the *Mahars* except for the labour corps were not recruited in the combatant ranks. However, after Dr. Ambedkar had made it an issue of grievance, the governor of Bombay succeeded with the central government to once again raise the Mahar Regiment in the Indian Army.<sup>622</sup>

Keeping in view Dr. Ambedkar's interest in Sikhism at this stage, we can be sure that he was acquainted with the military tradition of the Sikh religion. This goes back to Guru Gobind who was shaken by the news of the violent death of his father, Guru Teg Bahadur. Zeal to procure justice for the wrongs he and his people had suffered gripped his imagination.<sup>623</sup> Towards this end he made use both of pen and sword.<sup>624</sup> The story narrates how he reflected on the Sikh community of his times, "The disposition of all these assemblies" he said, "from the time of Guru Nanak has been that of *fakirs*, and they do not know the ways of the battle and war; it behoves me to make a new sect in my own name, and, having taught them the use of arms

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<sup>620</sup> Information provided by The Revd Ian Charles Weathrall, on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012. As a Captain in the Indian Army he was involved in the Second World War at Afghan borders. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his services.

<sup>621</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Mahars Have Been a Martial People' (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches*. Vol-17, Part-I. Mumbai: 2003, p. 306.

<sup>622</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Mahars Have Been a Martial People' (1941), p. 307.

<sup>623</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia* p. 40.

<sup>624</sup> Loehlin. *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh*. p. 3.

and the mode of government, get them to fight with the Turks.’<sup>625</sup> Moreover from his very young days Guru Gobind had the inclination to be soldier and had learnt the art of archery.<sup>626</sup> He also had learnt Persian and Gurumukhi scripts.

He associated with the Hindus more closely than any of his predecessors. That this was strategic cannot be ruled out. One reason could be that Guru Gobind wanted to gain the confidence of a larger society to accomplish his mission because his method did not rule out aggression altogether. The other reason could be to instill the spirit of zeal and fervour in his people. Perhaps it was for this reason that he entered the Temple of the goddess of *Nainadevi* beseeching, “‘O Durga! I, for the sake of taking revenge on the Turks, wish to make a sect, [do] you give me this power.” Having said this he called the Pundits and began to perform penance according to their directions.’<sup>627</sup> The question therefore arises whether Guru Gobind Singh was aiming to make Sikhism as a Hindu sect. The probe should take into account his withdrawal, at behest of his wife, to implement the Pundit’s suggestion to cut off the head of his son and offer it up. Secondly, the Code-of-Conduct<sup>628</sup> which he Drew up for the Sikhs, forbids the practice of any Hindu rites. This propitiation of *Durga* was controversial right from the beginning which is reflected in another story which describes how *Pundit Kesho* of Benares failed to get *Durga* to manifest herself at this occasion. So Guru Gobind Singh poured the whole stock of *ghee* or ‘clarified butter’ into the sacred fire causing an immense blaze which was seen for miles across, and, flashing his sword, he said, “This is the goddess of power”. But the story

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<sup>625</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia* Op cit, 1888, p. 40.

<sup>626</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*. 1888, p. 40.

<sup>627</sup> *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*. 1888, p. 40.

<sup>628</sup> The relevant sections of the Code of the Sikhs is as following;

1. Not to believe in the *Vedas*, *Sastrqs*, *Purans*, or the *Kuran*.
2. Not to pay any heed to the word of *Pandats*, *Pandhas*, *Miyas* or *Mahitas*.
3. Not to perform any funeral obsequies (*saradh*, *khiah*, *karam kriya*), but when performed, to do so according to the decrees of the *Granthji*.
4. Not to wear any *janeu* (Brahminical thread) *Bodi* (tuft of hair) *Mala* (necklace) *kanthi* (rosary).
5. Not to worship at any *mari* (grave) or *masan* (burning place).
6. Not to perform *Sandhia Gatri*, *Path* (reading of Brahminical books), or *Puja* (worship); only to read the *japji*.
7. Not to give food to any but the disciples.
8. Not to regard *Brahmans* and *Saiads* as high in rank.
9. Never to bare the head.
10. Never to touch a *hukka* or tobacco.
11. Never to apply razor to the head or beard.
12. Never to covet another man’s wife or another man’s goods.
13. Never to read *Mantras*, according to the rites of the *Vedas*, at marriages, deaths or births.
14. Never to be disobedient to the *Guru*.
15. Never to mix with the following five sects, namely, *Dhirmalliyas*, *Ramraias*, *Minas*, *Masands* and *Sirgunms*, and never consort with these five.

Cf. History of the Sikhs or *Sikkhan de Raj di Vikhia*,. (Translated by Major Henry Court). Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1888, pp. 41-42.

that 'the goddess had actually appeared and she gave him the sword' soon became popular.<sup>629</sup>

It seems unlikely that Guru Gobind would have aimed to assimilate the Sikh *Panth* in Hinduism save to gain confidence of the Hindus. Nonetheless he did use Hindu mythology to inspire zeal and courage in his disciples. This could be strategic partly due to the fact that his predecessors being *fakirs* hardly had any history of military heroism except sufferings and martyrdoms; and partly it was natural for Guru Gobind to use familiar symbol of those who had converted to Sikhism.

Whether or not Dr. Ambedkar was acquainted with the religious tradition associated with the military expertise of the Sikhs we do not know, but he surely was acquainted with the military history of India.<sup>630</sup> Therefore, it could be plausibly held that Dr. Ambedkar's attraction to Sikhism could be due to their history of military engagements.<sup>631</sup> His remark that, 'there are the Sikhs, about whose fighting qualities nothing need be said'<sup>632</sup> is an indication of his admiration of their prowess. He was aware of the fact that the Sikhs who were a miniscule minority, even less than the Indian Christians, constituted ten percent of the communal composition of the Indian Army.<sup>633</sup> Moreover the *Sikh Light Infantry* recruited the *Mazbhi* or the untouchable Sikhs in its ranks. Therefore, in Dr. Ambedkar's view, a change in social status by converting to Sikhism was a real possibility for Dalits.

## 5 Incomplete Response

In the end Dr. Ambedkar did not convert to Sikhism. This indicates that he did not consider it to be a suitable option for Dalits. This change in his position is obvious in his speech in 1949. Recalling its regrettable record on national security he said that the response of the Sikhs to resist the British expansion in India was deficient.

When the British were trying to destroy the Sikh rulers, Gulab Singh, their principal commander sat silent and did not help to save the Sikh kingdom. In 1857, when a large part of India had declared a war of independence against the British, the Sikhs stood and watched the event as silent spectators.<sup>634</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Loehlin. *The Granth of Guru Gobind Singh*. p. p. 4.

<sup>630</sup> B.A.M. Paradkar. 'The Religious Quest Of Ambedkar: The Religion And Ideological Background Of The Neo-Buddhism Movement Among The Scheduled Caste In India'. Published in Part-II of *Ambedkar and Neo-Buddhist Movement*. (Editors: T.S. Wilkinson and M.M. Thomas) Chennai: Christian Literature Society, 1972, p. 58.

<sup>631</sup> Paradkar. *The Religious Quest Of Ambedkar*. p. 58.

<sup>632</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Parturition of India' (1945), p.77.

<sup>633</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Parturition of India' (1945), p. 91.

<sup>634</sup> *Closing Speech of the First Constituent Assembly of India*. p.216.

Here Dr. Ambedkar's tenor indicates that he now viewed Sikh history with detachment.<sup>635</sup> I am not aware of places in Dr. Ambedkar's work where he refers to the conversion of Sikhs to Christianity. There were important and well known cases as Dalip Singh,<sup>636</sup> Raja Harnam Singh of Maharajas and Princess Amrita Kaur who descended from a branch of the Kapurthala Rajas, and a mass conversion of the Untouchables in Punjab to Christianity.<sup>637</sup> These cases have attracted a lot of attention.<sup>638</sup> We may take for granted that Dr. Ambedkar knew of these conversions and their implicit critique of the Sikh tradition. He must have mused on the possible cause for Dalits as well as of these prominent Sikhs to adopt Christianity.<sup>639</sup> It would have been natural for him to suspect genuine egalitarianism within the Sikhs community. But the obvious example where the Sikhs had fared no better than others was the example of *Ramdasi*, a Sikh sect. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that their status was clearly that of the Scheduled Caste.<sup>640</sup> This was a glaring example of caste system among the Sikhs.<sup>641</sup>

Let us take another example. The *Sikh Light Infantry* was a part of the expansion of the Indian Army in the World War-II.<sup>642</sup> The *Mazbhi* Sikhs were initially encouraged to enlist for the first time in the history of the Indian Army in an infantry regiment. But later they were not particularly regarded as suitable material for the

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<sup>635</sup> In this section of his speech, besides the Sikhs, Dr. Ambedkar also pointed how the Hindu commanders of King *Dahar* were bribed by the agents of *Mahommed-Bin-Kasim* and Hindus like *Jaichand* who invited *Mahommed Ghori* to fight against *Prithviraj* and. Cf. *ibid* *Closing Speech of the First Constituent Assembly of India* Pg.215.

<sup>636</sup> William Butler. *The Land of the Veda: Being Personal Reminiscences of India, its People, Thugs and Fakirs* (1871). New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2002, p. 50-53.

<sup>637</sup> Khushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Volume-II: 1839-2004*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 138.

<sup>638</sup> John C.B. Webster. *A Social History of Christianity: North-west India Since 1800*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 58, 26, 168-223.

<sup>639</sup> There could be various reasons for *Maharajah Dalip Singh's* conversion to Christianity. One could be the 'unacceptable' recollection of the *sati* of seven queens on his father, *Maharajah Ranjeet Singh's* pyre. Perhaps his mother was also one of the queens burned on the *Maharajah's* pyre. Butler describes the ceremonies surrounding the funeral rites of *Maharajah Ranjeet Singh* in June 1839 at Lahore, 'Early in the morning an immense concourse attending to witness the ceremony, the body of the Maharajah, decorated and wrapped in Cashmere shawls, was brought out from the palace and the procession formed, the four Ranees (Queens) in order, unveiled, sitting in open palanquins followed by seven other wives on foot, barefooted—some of them, the doctor declared, being not more than fourteen or fifteen years old. Then came the court, the officials, the military and the crowd. The ceremonies performed, the body was lifted to the top of the great pile; then the four Ranees ascended the order of their rank, seating themselves at the head; the other seven placed themselves around the feet. The chief widow, now setting on the funeral pile, apparently as calm as many American mothers on her dying bed, called to her *Khuruk Singh*, the son, and *Dhian Singh*, the favorite minister of the Maharajah, and, placing the dead king's hand first in the hand of the royal heir, and then in the hand of the powerful minister, made them swear to be mutually faithful. They then retired, and a strong, thick mat of reeds was placed around and over the ladies, and oil plentiful poured upon it. There they covered in silent expectation of the fatal moment. The brand was applied quickly, and the roaring flames leaped up and enveloped them, in fifteen minutes nothing remained of the eleven beautiful women but a heap of bones and ashes.' Cf. Butler. *The Land of the Veda*, p. 387.

<sup>640</sup> Kushwant Singh. *A History of the Sikhs Volume II: 1839-2004*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 156.

<sup>641</sup> B.R. Ambedkar: 'Rights are Not Affected in the Event of Conversion' (1936) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-One Mumbai: 2003, p. 249.

<sup>642</sup> S.L. Menezes. Lt. General *Fidelity and Honour: The Indian Army from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 351.



army.<sup>643</sup> If this was true then it couldn't have been difficult for Dr. Ambedkar to conclude that the fate of Dalits who would convert to Sikhism would be no better than the *Mazbhi* Sikhs if they joined the Infantry section of the Indian army.

There is a very curious turn which S.M. Michael brings to our attention in his research to elucidate a reason that probably brought an abrupt termination of Dr. Ambedkar's interest in Sikhism.<sup>644</sup> The reason was this: that the leaders of *Akali Dal*, a Sikh political party, did not want millions of *Mahars* entering Sikh fold and tilting political balance in another direction. They could foresee that with Dr. Ambedkar and his followers in the helm of affairs no one from the Sikh leaders at that time, like Baldev Singh, would be nominated to the Viceroy's Executive Council as a representative of the Sikh community.<sup>645</sup> It seems that Master Tara Singh, who perceived Dr. Ambedkar's entry a threat to his political leadership, sent Sardar Sujan Singh to him with a clear instruction to request Dr. Ambedkar to drop his idea of converting to Sikhism.<sup>646</sup> Despite others who invited Dr. Ambedkar to join Sikhism, Master Tara Singh preferred to keep silent.

## 6 Assessing the Sikhs

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, the indigenous origin of Sikhism was an advantage if he were to pioneer adopting it for his *Mahar* community. Not only was its sacred text nuanced with Hindu ideas, but also incorporated *bhakti* and syncretistic poets like Kabir in its canon. At the same time its monotheism, its centrality of the word and its worship free of idols agreed with the teaching of Islam. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of assessing a religion, if Sikhism on one hand had preserved a just social order of egalitarianism, freedom and kinship, then on the other it was sufficiently rational to discard polytheism in favour of monotheism. The credibility for this consideration could be supported if one takes into view what Bishop Pickett records of his conversation with Dr. Ambedkar. This is what McPhee published on Pickett's conversation with Ambedkar, 'Pickett told Ambedkar that he had heard he was an atheist. Ambedkar responded, "Sometime ago I would not have been insulted by such a statement, but I do not think it is correct"'.<sup>647</sup> But to use providence as

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<sup>643</sup> Interview with Captain Ian C. Weathrall OBE on April 4, 2009 at 4.00 pm at his residence at The Brotherhood House 7-Court Lane, Delhi-54, India.

<sup>644</sup> It was recalled by Sardar Kapur Singh who remembered what 'Sardar Inder Singh Karwal, an advocate and Akali Dal leader, said to a small group of lawyers in the bar room at Punjab High Court in Chandigarh in September 1964. Sardar Harnam Singh Jhalla (M.A., L.L.B. Advocate and later Judge of High Court) had explained to Inder Singh Karwal, "O you don't have an understanding of these matters. By making six crore of untouchables, Sikh, should we hand over the Darbar Sahib to Churas". The truth of the matter according to Harnam Singh, (is that) the actual truth ... was even more crude and despicable. It was the politics of Akali Dal. Cf. Michael S.M. *Dalit's Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra*. New Delhi: ISPCK 2010, p.141.

<sup>645</sup> Michael. *Dalit's Encounter with Christianity*. p.141.

<sup>646</sup> Michael. *Dalit's Encounter with Christianity*. p. 142.

<sup>647</sup> G. Arthur McPhee. *The Road to Delhi: Bishop Pickett Remembered 1890-1981*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 246.

justification especially for unfair practices in Dr. Ambedkar's view verged on irrationality.

However what he said of the advantage of conversion of Dalits to Sikhism is equally significant. He saw a double benefit in it. Conversion would benefit both i.e. the country and the Dalits. Needless to say those values associated with Sikh military tradition, namely bravery, determination, pride and honesty, would take more than a generation to redefine a Dalit convert's consciousness, yet Dr. Ambedkar would have regarded this redefining to be of greater worth than any offer of wealth without dignity. In the light of what we will discuss in the ninth chapter it must be said such values though imbibed from Sikhism are not inconsistent with non-combatant religions like Buddhism. At the root of this lay his theory of religion that made him assess Sikhism as an authentic religion. In other words it was moral, just and rational.

Now while Dr. Ambedkar assessed Sikhism positively, we see that there are differences between Dr. Ambedkar's perception of it and its actual practice on the following points. Firstly, not are there factions like the *Ramgharia*, *Mazbhi* and *Jats*,<sup>648</sup> but there are also sub-identities among them like *Amrit-dhari*, *Kesh-dhari* and *Sahaj-dhari*.<sup>649</sup> Others who carry names like *Arora*, *Khattri* and *Ahluwalia* indicate their caste.<sup>650</sup> Secondly, the Punjabi ethnocentric character of the Sikh community is a fact to be reckoned with. Thirdly, although the Sikhs have spread in many parts of the world, their Punjabi culture and origin limits their religion. It manifests a specific ethnic flavour wherever they settle down which in turn restricts the universality of Sikhism.

We see that there are differences between Dr. Ambedkar ideals and the Sikh community. He did not see the ideal of equality and unity in the Sikh community life.<sup>651</sup> This known fact must have made him unsure of the treatment the *Mahar* would be subjected to in the generations to come once they entered the Sikh fold. Would the dominant *Jat*-Sikhs treat the *Mahar*-Sikhs equally? Would they allow them social equality? Would the *Marathi* speaking Sikhs be given a just space in the Punjabi dominated culture? Will the Sikhs harness adequate financial resources for the social alleviation of the *Mahar* converts? I cannot find places where Dr. Ambedkar deals with these queries and contradictions as he has left us with a very incomplete response. However, we may take it for certain that these points were decisive for Dr. Ambedkar to steer away from Sikhism.

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<sup>648</sup> W. H. McLeod. *Sikhs and Sikhism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.111.

<sup>649</sup> McLeod. *Sikhs and Sikhism*. p.110.

<sup>650</sup> McLeod. *Sikhs and Sikhism*. p.111.

<sup>651</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress And Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables' (1945), *Idem Writings and Speeches*. Vol-9. Mumbai: 1990, p. 185.

## 7 Conclusion

WHAT COMES OUT IN THE ABOVE DISCUSSION is that if on the one hand Dr. Ambedkar appreciated the suitability of Sikhism to address the concerns of Dalits, then on the other, he found that their community was deficient in their religious ideal of egalitarianism. Equality in the presence of *Granth Sahib* or the holy book, kinship in *Sangat* or fellowship and fraternity in *langar* or common meals were merely ritualized activities whereas the actual reports of tyranny committed against the Scheduled Castes who had arrived from Pakistan at the partition of India in 1947 by their *Jat* Sikh coreligionists took him in dismay.<sup>652</sup>

Besides what comes out in our findings is that some Sikh leaders were opposed to welcome a large bulk of Dalits into the Sikh fold. This must have greatly disappointed Dr. Ambedkar which explains the abrupt break in his engagement with the Sikhs leaving his response to them incomplete. It is, therefore, understandable that despite Sikhism's indigenous origin, its well organized community and well formed political front, Dr. Ambedkar did not feel wholly welcomed into it. In this period he had rediscovered Buddhism in a concrete way to which he had been introduced in his younger days but remarkably there was a drawing closer to the Bible too! Of his rediscovery of Buddhism we will discuss in the last chapter. But the query before us is this, what kind of Buddhism would it be?

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<sup>652</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Source Material Vol-1. 1982 Pg.349 cited in Michael S.M. *Dalit's Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2010, p.140.

## Chapter Eight

### Response to Jews

#### 1. Introduction

A remarkable difference in Dr. Ambedkar's treatment of Judaism was that he never criticized it in the way he did the adherents of other religions. Instead he was interested to observe the social order that at that time was being created in Israel, a new State in Palestine.<sup>653</sup> In 1941 Bombay Sentinel, a monthly magazine published his article "Moses and His Significance".<sup>654</sup> Among those with whom he discussed stories of the Hebrew Bible, was Mrs. Fanny Fitzgerald,<sup>655</sup> otherwise known as lady "F" to whom he also had dedicated a book.<sup>656</sup> We find that his references to Judaism and Jews are sparse. Yet they constitute more material in his writings than what he wrote on the Sikhs. Interestingly his references to the Jewish religion had a purpose. It was aimed to explore the traits of an authentic religion in line with his theory of religion which we have studied earlier in chapter two. Keeping in view the overall picture of his hypothesis of religion we will study his response to the Jews and their religion Judaism.

#### 2. History of the Jews

We are reminded that Judaism has had a long history of existence on the western Indian coasts especially in Kerala. The Jewish people had come many centuries earlier than the Christians, perhaps escaping destruction by the Gentile powers of those times. The narrative of what happened in Judea is in the Hebrew Bible. We shall, therefore, briefly take into account their history before we focus on Dr. Ambedkar's response.

##### 2.1 The Biblical Story

Although half of the modern Indian Jews live in Manipur and Mizoram and only a quarter in Mumbai, we have in Kochi and Calicut, towns in Kerala, an ancient Jewish community. The story of Kochi Jews begins with the relocation of their ancestors from Palestine in C 587 B.C.E..<sup>657</sup> This date is interesting as it coincides with uprisings in Judah. Of what we read in the biblical narrative<sup>658</sup> it is evident that things deteriorated in 610 B.C.E. when Neco II, the Egyptian Pharaoh who succeeded Psammetichus, marched against the Babylonians to capture Haran.<sup>659</sup>

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<sup>653</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Moses and His Significance' (1941), idem 'Dr. Ambedkar and the Jewish People' *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-I. Mumbai, 2003, p. 342.

<sup>654</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Moses and His Significance' (1941), p. 342.

<sup>655</sup> Nanak Chand Rattu. *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Focus Impressions, 2001, pp. 125, 139.

<sup>656</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945), The Dedication Page.

<sup>657</sup> *India Handbook* IV-Edition. Robert and Roma Brandnock (Edt.) Illinois: Passport Books, 1995, p. 972.

<sup>658</sup> II-Kings 23.29 and II-Chronicles 35.20-24.

<sup>659</sup> John Bright. *A History of Israel* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). London: SCM Press, 1972, p. 324.

King Josiah of Judah, who was allied with Babylon, challenged Pharaoh's army at Megiddo. Josiah's forces were defeated and the king was killed. This was a tragic blow to Judah. Pharaoh summoned Josiah's successor Jehoahaz at Riblah in Syria to depose and deport him to Egypt.<sup>660</sup> His brother Eliakim, also called Jehoiakim was installed over Judah as an Egyptian vassal who had to pay a heavy tax to Pharaoh. But the situation suddenly changed when the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar regained their control over this territory by defeating the Egyptian forces. Jehoiakim, albeit reluctantly, had to submitted to Nebuchadnezzar. Judah was not an ally of the Babylonians anymore but became their vassal.

Misjudging Nebuchadnezzar's retreat as a defeat after another battle with Egyptian in 601, Jehoiakim rebelled hoping the Egyptians would aid his revolt. But no help came from Pharaoh. In 598 the Babylonian army marched back to Judah; it is suggested that Jehoiakim being held responsible for the mess he had created for his country was assassinated,<sup>661</sup> therefore, those in position of political responsibility hoped to receive milder treatment from the Babylonians.<sup>662</sup> But on March 16, 597, i.e. within three months of the enthronement of his eighteen year old son, Jehoiachin, the capital city, Jerusalem, surrendered to the Babylonians.<sup>663</sup> The Judean king and leading citizens were exiled to Babylon as prisoners. The King's uncle, Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah, was installed to rule in his stead. By 589 another revolt was attempted which was beyond Zedekiah's strength to control. In January 588 the Babylonian forces arrived and it took them a year to bring the whole territory under their firm control. In July 587 BCE the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem under the command of their leader Nebuchadnezzar and destroyed it. Then Zedekiah was blinded after seeing his sons executed and taken captive to Babylon. Similarly, the leading citizens were arrested and produced before Nebuchadnezzar and were sent for execution. And so the political State of Judah was ended.<sup>664</sup>

## 2.2 The Indian Story

The Jewish story in India maintains that the Israelites, during this critical juncture of their history arrived at the shores of Kerala. They integrated into society, built synagogues in the towns where they lived and successive generations developed trade expanding it even with China. Over a period of time they served the Indian kings in responsible positions. At the moment, Indian Jews are divided into five categories,

1. Cochin or Kochi Jews whose arrival to India is obscure.
2. Bene Israel who arrived about 2,100 years ago.

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<sup>660</sup> II-Kings 23.31-35 and Jeremiah 22.

<sup>661</sup> Jeremiah 22.18-19, 36.30

<sup>662</sup> Bright. *A History of Israel*. p. 326.

<sup>663</sup> Bright. *A History of Israel*. p. 327.

<sup>664</sup> Bright. *A History of Israel*. p. 330.

3. Baghdadi Jews who arrived about 250 years ago from Iraq, Afghanistan and Arab.
4. Bnei Menashe of Mizo and Kuki tribes in North East India claiming descent from Manasseh.
5. Bene Ephraim is the Telegu speaking Jews who converted in 1981.

History indicates that although the Jewish people have had a long presence in India, they preferred to remain secluded to a degree. James Massey, a well known Indian theologian, writes that 'historically their presence in India is confirmed from 1020 C.E. onwards. This time is known from the date inscribed on a set of copper plates which were given to a Jewish leader named Joseph Rabban (Issupu Irappan) by a Hindu king.<sup>665</sup> These copper plates had inscribed on them seventy two privileges which he had granted to the Jewish community. These included "the right to ride an elephant, to be carried in a litter, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, to have a crier call out before their approach so that the lowly might withdraw from the streets." Similar privileges were granted to a group of Syrian Christians by the same Hindu King who thus gave both the communities the status of caste Hindus'.<sup>666</sup> As expected they showed no interest to increase numerically by proselytizing and so their religious ideas were never disseminated in India. Conversion of some to Judaism in Mizoram in north-east India and Andhra Pradesh in south India in more recent times is exceptional. It is beyond the scope of our discussion here to go into its details.

### 3 Considering Judaism

For Dr. Ambedkar the evolution of religion could not be understood apart from the development of society from a savage phase to a more civilized stage. In this

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<sup>665</sup> It is believed that the name of the Hindu king was Bhaskar Ravi Varma. The inscribed text of his royal charter *sasanam* in the ancient Tamil language on the two copper plates dates between 974 and 1020 CE. Earlier estimation of 379 CE has now been abandoned. a translation of this very interesting text reads like this:

'Hail! Prosperity! (the following) gift was made by him who had assumed the title King of Kings, His majesty the king, the glorious Bhaskara Ravi Varma, in the time during which he was wielding sceptre and ruling over many hundred-thousands of places, in the 36<sup>th</sup> year after the second year on the day on which he was pleased to stay at Muyirikkodu; We have given to Issuppu Srappan (of the village) of Anjuvannum, together with the 72 proprietary rights, the tolls on female elephants and (other riding) animals, the revenue of Anjuvannum, a lamp in the day time, a cloth to spread (in front to walk on), a palanquin, a parasol, a vaduga drum, a large trumpet, a gateway, an arch, a canopy (in shape) of an arch, a garland and so forth.

We have remitted tolls and the tax on balances.

Moreover, we have granted, with these copper leaves that he need not pay (the dues), which the inhabitants of the city pay to the royal palace,

and that he may enjoy (the benefits) which (they) enjoy.

To Issuppu Irappan of Anjuvannam, the male children to the female children born of him, to his nephews, and to the sons-in-law who have married (his daughters we have given) Anjuvannam, as an hereditary estate for as long as the world and the moon shall exist. Hail!

Cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 5. Cecil Roth (ed.). Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1978, p. 621.

<sup>666</sup> Massey. *Roots of Dalit History*, p. 28.

regard what he puts forward is very interesting. Earlier I had suggested calling his analytical method as the *ten-shifts hypothesis* where one sees how deeply the sociology of that time had shaped his thinking on religion. An examination of the *ten-shifts hypothesis* we have already undertaken earlier in chapter two. From there we can recall that Dr. Ambedkar regarded these theological and social changes as revolutionary spanning over several millennia.

Nor have the stages of advancement followed in quick succession. That man was for long ages a savage before he made sufficient progress to be called a Barbarian admits of no doubt. Equally little in doubt is it that other long ages of Barbarianism have preceded the final ascent to the lowest stage of civilization. The precise period of covered by these successive 'ages' is of course only conjectural; but something like one hundred thousand years may perhaps be taken as a safe minimum estimate.<sup>667</sup>

Accordingly religion in antiquity underwent change as society made its transition into modern phase. What did a typical religion of antique society look like? What were its features? We can recall from our earlier discussion in Chapter Two that the concern for preservation of society was typical of religion in antique society. Dr. Ambedkar underscored that this trait entailed precedence of society over the individual in case there was a conflict of interest. For this reason he categorized religion of antiquity as religion of *utility*. The question to ask here is this, did Judaism preserve the traits of a religion of antique society?

### **3.1 A Religion of Antique Society**

Following Dr. Ambedkar's line of thinking, it is possible to see traces of henotheistic phase in the Jewish scriptures. Henotheism was a mark of antiquity. The pointers towards this are the story of Laban's household gods (Genesis 31.19). Similarly the mention of the names of deities like Molech (Leviticus 20.3), Rimmon (2 Kings 5.18) and Baalzabub (2 Kings 1.6) are such instances. In this sense Yahweh was accepted exclusively as the God of Israel (Leviticus 26.12). The idea that Yahweh was responsible for securing the protection of Israel, his people, remained in place.

Noteworthy here is the aspect of *utility* which Dr. Ambedkar contended to be the hallmark of the religion of antique society. In other words, to obey God's Law ensured the preservation of Israel. The command to execute wizards and mediums in Mosaic Law<sup>668</sup> indicates that any individual who became a threat to society had to be removed. In Jewish religious law this can be regarded as a trait of an antique age when the centre of concern was the preservation of society rather than the protection of the individual. This is aptly summed up in the text,

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<sup>667</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 135.

<sup>668</sup> Leviticus 20.27.

When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.'<sup>669</sup>

A close reading of Dr. Ambedkar's discussion of his hypothesis suggests that Judaism provided him the basic ingredients of a religion in antique society, thus solving his problem of establishing the claims of his hypothesis. But if we accept Dr. Ambedkar's solution then it leaves us with the question of other religions of antiquity unanswered. Why did Dr. Ambedkar not make them the basis for establishing his *ten-shifts hypothesis*? Why he did not use them to understand the nature of religion in the antique society? Do these religions not provide us a glimpse into its nature? Indeed they do! Yet, Dr. Ambedkar writes that the disadvantage of these religions was that they had not made the revolutionary advancements in the line of the *ten-shifts hypothesis*; instead they merely elaborated on what they had received from their barbaric social stage.

The civilization of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and even of Rome and Greece had only been a revolving civilization. Their progress and achievements are only the elaboration of the details of methods and intentions handed down by man when he was in a Barbaric state. They added nothing revolutionary to the sum total of civilization to which they were heirs. They merely did better what used to be done crudely by their predecessors. Nor have the stages of advancement followed by their quick succession.<sup>670</sup>

What these religions could not provide, Judaism did. It supplied appropriate ingredients for Dr. Ambedkar to construct his hypothesis. It was this that possibly made him to regard Judaism as one suitably advanced compared to other religions of antiquity. Therefore, he took the biblical glimpses seriously enough to construct the contours of a religion of antique society. Another advantage of Judaism was that it had adapted itself as a religion of the modern society. This was visible in its essentials of *justice* and *utility* which other surviving religions of antiquity could not provide.

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<sup>669</sup> Deuteronomy 6.20-25.

<sup>670</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p. 135.

<sup>670</sup> See foot notes *ibid* James Massey [1996] Pg. 29.



One also hears a Hindu say that his civilization has inherent strength because it has survived while all other ancient civilization such as Egypt, Babylon, Judea, Rome and Greece have vanished. Such a view however legitimate misses the main point. The main point is not whether the civilization is ancient or whether it has survived. The main point is what are the merits of a civilization? What is its worth, if it has survived, on what plain?<sup>671</sup>

Over and against these religions of antiquity, the strength of Judaism that impressed Dr. Ambedkar lay in the fact that despite its antique origin it had evolved as a modern religion too. If one could see *utility* as the central concern in its antiquity then one can also see *justice* as its concern in its modern phase. I will show this in a few biblical texts at the end of this section below.

However, to hold that Dr. Ambedkar would agree with those would say that if Judaism was to be weighed, it would not be found wanting as an authentic religion both in antiquity and modernity, would be an exaggeration. However, Smith may be closer to truth in what he held concerning the exhaustive research in the field of Jewish religion. This is what he wrote more than a hundred years ago, 'the growth of the Old Testament religion can now be followed from stage to stage, in a way that is hardly possible with any other religion of antiquity'.<sup>672</sup> It was this claim and perhaps the additional drawback of comparatively scarce resources on other religions of that era that encouraged Dr. Ambedkar to use the resources of the Hebrew Bible. In addition to this of what we know historically the Jewish presence in India from ancient times could not be forgotten. In this sense we can say that in using Jewish sources Dr. Ambedkar did not depend entirely on foreign resources to build up his case. We shall see how he does this in our discussions on his use of Jewish sources both directly and indirectly in the discussion below.

### 3.2 A Religion of Modern Society

Care should be taken not to confuse a religion of modern society with primal religions in our times. They are distinct. The survival of primal religions till our times, in Dr. Ambedkar's view, did not make them religions of our modern society. Similarly the religion of antique society was unfit for modern society, and so it needed to be updated. This distinction is fundamental to understand Dr. Ambedkar's view on religion. With Judaism it is very interesting to note that despite its origin in antiquity, it became a religion of modern society. For instance, in Judaism instead of regarding *Yahweh* as the parochial deity of Israelites, the shift was

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<sup>671</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Civilization or Felony' (1938), p. 136.

<sup>672</sup> Robertson Smith. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907, p. Vii.

later made to regard him as the universal God, the Creator of all.<sup>673</sup> This fits in with Dr. Ambedkar's hypothesis.<sup>674</sup>

## 4 Values for Good Religion

### 4.1 Deity and Society

Writing to Fanny Fitzgerald<sup>675</sup> sometime in 1945, Dr. Ambedkar had pointed out that the story of Ruth in the bible had a social aspect. Not because she changed her religion, but because she changed her society. This change required change of deities too. Clearly the text of key importance to him was Ruth's declaration "your people shall be my people and your God my God"<sup>676</sup> and his idea of what the ancient society was he learnt from Prof. Smith Robertson's writings.<sup>677</sup> He pointed out that the difference between the ancient society and the modern society was this: the former consisted of human beings plus God but the latter consisted of human beings alone.<sup>678</sup> For Dr. Ambedkar cult and nationality were connected and so the change in the former led to the change in the latter.

It is quite clear that in the ancient world a change of nationality involved a change of cult. Social fusion meant religious fusion. In modern society abandonment of religion or acceptance of another is not necessary for social fusion. This is best illustrated by what is in modern terminology and naturalization, whereby the citizen of one state abandons his citizenship of the state and becomes a citizen of a new state. In this process of naturalization religion had no place. One can have a social fusion – which is another name for naturalisation – without undergoing a religious fusion.<sup>679</sup>

It must be admitted that the way Dr. Ambedkar had interpreted the story of Ruth leads us into difficulties. Primarily because the way he has used the text is not only unprecedented but also inaccurate. Let us take the case in India. We know that in the antique times people were familiar with religious plurality. So we have the atheistic worldviews like Jainism, Buddhism and *Charvaka*, all existing along side with the *Brahminical* Hinduism which had a profusion of deities. In those times as in our times the adherent of different schools constituted the same society.

In this matter of social fusion there was nothing original in Dr. Ambedkar's point, but his contrast of the ancient practice with that of the current times is

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<sup>673</sup> Metzger in the preface of the NRSV Bible writes, 'The use of any proper name for the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom the true God had to be distinguished, began to be discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era and is inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church. Bruce M Metzger 'To the Reader' in *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Michigan: Zondervan, 1988, p. xii.

<sup>674</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 14.

<sup>675</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945), The Dedication Page.

<sup>676</sup> Ruth 1.16.

<sup>677</sup> The book that Dr. Ambedkar had read was Robertson Smith's *The Religion of the Semites* published by Adam and Charles Black in 1907. Smith was Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge.

<sup>678</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945), The Dedication Page.

<sup>679</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 17.

striking. We should bear in mind that in Dr. Ambedkar's time India was well familiar with the Europeans. These were the British, the Dutch, the French, the Danes and the Portuguese. In those times the naturalization of Europeans to Indian cultures and vice versa was not rare. On the one hand the Europeans adopted Moghul culture and on the other Indians adopted western Christianity.<sup>680</sup> It was obvious that neither adopting Christianity socially fused the Indians with the Europeans, nor Europeans who were socially fused with Indian culture gave up Christianity.<sup>681</sup> This was, unlike religions of the antique society, possible with religion in modern society.

In modern society abandonment of religion or acceptance of another is not necessary for social fusion. This is best illustrated by what is in modern terminology and naturalization, whereby the citizen of one state abandons his citizenship of the state and becomes a citizen of a new state. In this process of naturalization religion has no place. One can have a social fusion—which is another name for naturalization—without undergoing a religious fusion.<sup>682</sup>

Conversely in the story of Ruth Dr. Ambedkar showed that this option of social fusion without religious fusion was not possible in ancient society because in antiquity deity was inseparable from society.<sup>683</sup> In addition to the difficulty I have already shared in respect to this hypothesis, Dr. Ambedkar, failed to analyze Jewish adaptation into modernity. For instance, he nowhere discussed the possibility for a person to become a Jewish adherent without changing nationality or society for instance Mizo converts to Judaism, in the north-east India. We also see that the Judaism of modern society protects the individual's right to accept or reject the Jewish deity. There are many ardent Jews who do not adhere to the Jewish religion. In this sense, deity no more holds a central place in the Jewish society.

Even so, there are some fundamental questions in this regard for which I did not find any answer in Dr. Ambedkar's writings. For instance it is easy to see that a convert to Judaism would be received into the Jewish community but what is difficult to answer is this, will a Gentile be received into the Jewish community as a person of no faith? Will a person be naturalized into the Jewish community without

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<sup>680</sup> This has been brought out in the historical novels of William Dalrymple especially the *White Mughals*, 2002, and *The Last Mughal*, 2007, published by the Penguin Books.

<sup>681</sup> Col. James Skinner [1778-1841] who raised the Skinner's Horse Cavalry is an example of those who fused with the Indian society but did not give up Christianity as their faith; but others like S.E. Stokes (1904) an American Episcopalian, who came to India as a missionary, converted along with his family to Hinduism in the Arya Samaj sect, are examples of those who fused with Indian society by adopting Hinduism. Cf. Constance Millington *Whether We Be Many or Few: A History Of Cambridge/Delhi Mission*. Bangalore: Asia Trading Corporation, 1999, p. 125.

<sup>682</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy Of Hinduism' (1941), p. 17.

<sup>683</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 17.

Jewish antecedents? Dr. Ambedkar does not answer these fundamental queries where the position of deity with reference to society is still unclear.

## 4.2 Fidelity

Dr. Ambedkar made use of the story of Daniel to bring out the theme of fidelity.<sup>684</sup> His interest in this story was due to his *ten-shifts hypothesis*.<sup>685</sup> It primarily demonstrated the faithfulness of the Israelites to their God YHWH,<sup>686</sup> which showed that each antique society had its own deity which bestowed on its people prosperity and abundance.<sup>687</sup> However, for Dr. Ambedkar fidelity of a community to its God helped its adherents to proceed in the right direction. We know that fidelity to God means reposing one's faith in God and on nothing else. Here Dr. Ambedkar uses the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the Three Young Men of the Jewish tradition.<sup>688</sup> He showed that the fidelity of these young men was not to the scripture but to their God.<sup>689</sup> This approach opens up the possibility of critically testing the worth of scriptures on the anvil of justice. For Dr. Ambedkar a religion that taught its adherents to place their trust on the scriptures instead on its God halted human progress.<sup>690</sup> Here Dr. Ambedkar showed the advantage which the Jewish religion offered. It encourages its adherents to be bold to doubt and to inquire. Dr. Ambedkar would agree with us if we affirmed that this exercise would result in the acquisition of fresh knowledge and social progress, both in secular and religious fields of study. Dr. Ambedkar himself exemplified this in his critical assessment of the Buddhist scriptures and in composing a new canon for the Neo-Buddhists.<sup>691</sup> We will study about this later in the ninth chapter.

## 4.3 Justice

In Dr. Ambedkar's understanding, the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* which a religion propounded for its people could be of two types: the first type was a scheme that disregarded an individual's good but was centered on establishing a hierarchical social order.<sup>692</sup> The second type was that which was interested to promote the individual's good in a free and just social order. The former was incompatible with modern society because, as he had pointed out in his *ten-shifts hypothesis*, the focus of modern religion to do justice to every individual had reached an irreversible point.<sup>693</sup> Genuine justice for individuals was possible only in a free

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<sup>684</sup> The Bible: The Book of Daniel Chapter 3.

<sup>685</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), pp. 14-20.

<sup>686</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 6.

<sup>687</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy of Hinduism' (1941), p. 19.

<sup>688</sup> The Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>689</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 6.

<sup>690</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Riddles in Hinduism' (1956), p. 8.

<sup>691</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), The Introduction Page.

<sup>692</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p. 99.

<sup>693</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy Of Hinduism' (1941), pp.19-20.

and equal social order which recognized the distinctiveness and worth of every individual. This meant that every individual was to be awarded what he/she had deserved. Conversely it would be unjust for a person to suffer by virtue of belonging to a disadvantaged class. It would also be unjust not to undertake initiatives to alleviate socially disadvantaged people from their sufferings under the pretext of their ancestral sins. He found a passage in the Hebrew Bible to support his view.

As a starting point for the discussion of the subject one may begin by referring to the words... where Jehova says to Ezekiel, 'Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die ... the son shall not bear the iniquity of the Father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked upon him'<sup>694</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar pointed out the worth and the privileges which an individual deserved.<sup>695</sup> Anything less than this would be unjust. Clearly in his view justice required that society, despite the economic and political disparities must be prepared to treat people equally.

#### 4.4 Equality

We know that in his *ten-shifts hypothesis* Dr. Ambedkar had held that the deities in the antique society were thought to have physically given birth to their respective ethnic people. This however changed when religion evolved into modernity where people instead of being perceived as physical descendents of God were considered as created in the image-of-God.

In modern society the idea of divine fatherhood has become entirely dissociated from the physical basis of natural fatherhood. In its place man is conceived to be in the image of God; he is not deemed to be begotten by God.<sup>696</sup>

This change in Dr. Ambedkar's view was moral.<sup>697</sup> What he underscored was that in its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* a religion of modern society perceived God not as a father but as its moral governor. Accordingly God was ascribed a supreme moral being 'capable of absolute good and absolute virtue'.<sup>698</sup> In other words God was just. The question that now confronts us is this, how did Dr. Ambedkar explain God's justice specifically goodness and virtue? In answer Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that God treated all human beings as equal. He used the Hebrew Bible to show that God did this in two ways; firstly, by creating them in his own image so that no one was

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<sup>694</sup> Ezekiel 18. 4 & 20

<sup>695</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Hindu Social Order' (1946), p..99.

<sup>696</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy Of Hinduism' (1941), p. 16.

<sup>697</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy Of Hinduism' (1941), p. 16.

<sup>698</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Philosophy Of Hinduism' (1941), p. 16.

inferior to another<sup>699</sup> and secondly, by treating each personality as sacred<sup>700</sup> so that no one was to suffer for the iniquity for another.<sup>701</sup> This affirmed that God was a moral being.

Attention should be drawn here to the obvious i.e. Dr. Ambedkar had discovered the justice as an inalienable aspect of morality in Judaism. This was basic for the modernization of the Dalits. The advantage was that Judaism was a religion of antique society and so none could contend with what Judaism stood for. There was no excuse to support social order at the cost of individual liberty and there was no reason to advocate social inequality as a pretext to maintain social order. Any hierarchical scheme propounded by another religion of antiquity to create an unequal social order could be adequately challenged of its authenticity.

So we have seen in this section that in Judaism Dr. Ambedkar not only found trails of antique society and its religion, but also identified ingredients for a good religion suitable for modern society. This was in his line of thought. He did not believe religions to be true or false; rather he assessed them to be good or bad.<sup>702</sup>

## 5 Inspiration from Israel

If not the figure of Moses, certainly his leadership was a source of inspiration and hope to Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>703</sup> But what may come as a surprise is a curious but concrete statement,

“I believe that just as there was a land of promise for the Jews, so the Depressed Classes must be destined to have their land of promise. I trust that just as the Jews reached their land of promise, so will the Depressed Classes in the end reach their land of promise.”<sup>704</sup>

It is unclear what he precisely meant by the phrase ‘land of promise’ which he felt that the Dalit community was destined for and should reach. Was this ‘land’ geographic or was it metaphorical? We shall examine both options before we draw some conclusions. Firstly, did Dr. Ambedkar in his mind see a possibility of Dalits having their own geographical space? In view of the fact that his book *Pakistan or the*

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<sup>699</sup> Book of *Genesis* Chapter-1 verse-26-27 in the Hebrew Bible or The Old Testament. This is how it reads in the New Revised Standard version, ‘Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”. So God created humankind in his image, in the *image of God* he created them male and female he created them’. (emphasis added)

<sup>700</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Hindu Social Order’ (1946), p. 99.

<sup>701</sup> Ezekiel 18.4, 20 which Dr. Ambedkar cited is this, ‘Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die ... A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of a righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.’

<sup>702</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ (1941), p. 22.

<sup>703</sup> Glora Becher. ‘Dr. Ambedkar and The Jewish People’ (1941) *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol. 17.1. 2003, p. 343.

<sup>704</sup> *ibid* Glora Becher. p. 343.

*Partition of India* was published in December 1940,<sup>705</sup> his inclination in this direction, it could be argued, be taken as plausible. It was under compulsion of social change that he advocated partition yet his line of reasoning would show that he could support a movement of Dalits in this direction as well. The second option is to examine if he was using the phrase 'land of promise' metaphorically? This leads us to another query, if so then what did he mean by this metaphor? The answer for this is clear. What he meant was the pioneering efforts of the Jews in Palestine "in respect of the Social order that was being created there".<sup>706</sup> Obviously this was pointing to the independent Jewish State that would be governed on democracy and egalitarianism. Looking at these options, it is likely that he used the phrase 'land of promise' metaphorically where all people lived in an egalitarian society. Moreover, unless the social events proved compelling, he would not advocate the territorial division of India because its fragmentation would hold no promise of egalitarianism, which in his view, was the key for the restoration of *selfhood* of Dalits.

The inspiration of the Exodus narrative lies in its compelling storyline of liberation and the unwavering role of Moses not to yield to any pressure from within or without. Dr. Ambedkar saw in this story all that he had experienced for over the years as he struggled for the rights of the Dalits, namely the yearning of the slaves to remain under bondage rather than to come to terms with the risks involved in freedom, temptation to worship idols of oppressive deities and exclusion of aliens for instance Moses' wife.<sup>707</sup> It would not be difficult to notice the underlying analogy of the Israelites to the Dalits, and Moses to Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>708</sup> It is in this light that his comment, 'Moses was not merely a great leader of the Jews. He is a leader whose birth, any downtrodden community may pray for'<sup>709</sup> becomes clear of its meaning. Moreover he underscored the relevance of Moses—a prophet who gave egalitarian laws to a society in its antique stage, as an inspirational figure not only for the contemporary Jews but for the Dalits and their leaders in India too.

## 6 Assessing the Indian Jewish Society

Having seen how Dr. Ambedkar viewed Judaism, we now will Draw our attention to discuss the reasons for his responding to it. Obviously, the social influence of the Indian Jews did not impress him. They did not exert any influence except for being duly awarded many centuries ago for excelling in the tasks they undertook. It demanded an exclusive interest of scholar like Nathan Katz to research on them, who described their double-barrel Indian and Jewish characteristic as

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<sup>705</sup>B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), behind the title page.

<sup>706</sup> Op Cit Glora Becher. p. 342.

<sup>707</sup> ibid Glora Becher. p. 343.

<sup>708</sup> ibid Glora Becher. p. 518.

<sup>709</sup> ibid Glora Becher. p. 343.

acculturated identity.<sup>710</sup> He appreciated their commonsense of striking a balance between their host culture and their Jewish identity. On the one hand they resisted assimilation in the host culture and on the other they did not indulge in gross manifestation of their Jewish antecedents; instead they harmoniously merged in a pluralistic Indian society. Such descriptions, however, would have hardly attracted Dr. Ambedkar's attention. Moreover in their insignificantly small community, they would have been unable to entertain a large number of Dalits converting to it. Indeed their ethnocentricity, in spite of exceptions, could not have allowed them to welcome the Dalit to Judaism.

Although I did not find anywhere in his writings, it is realistic to hold that Dr. Ambedkar during his time of studies in America would have had chances to interact with Jewish adherents. If so, what could he have garnered from this? A possible answer may be insights from the accomplishment of Mosheh ben Maimon or popularly known as Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher and physician (1135-1204).<sup>711</sup> I did not find anywhere in Dr. Ambedkar's writings mention of Maimonides, though every Rabbi knows him. But keeping in view his hypothesis of religion, I see an interesting correlation of Maimonides reformation with Dr. Ambedkar's ideas.

The thirteen principles of faith that Maimonides had articulated as basic to Judaism had universalized God as a creator of all but not in a physical sense.<sup>712</sup> He gave central importance to human beings in his scheme of religion. Every person was expected to live according to accepted moral standard.<sup>713</sup> Due to his long

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<sup>710</sup> Describing the Jews in India Nathan Katz writes that, 'They have neither submerged their Jewishness by assimilating into their host culture nor used their Jewishness as a refuge from a hostile Gentile host society. The Cochin Jews have cultivated their finely balanced identity in the affectionate cultured embrace of their Hindu, Christian and Muslim neighbours.' Cf. Nathan Katz. *Who are the Jews of India?* London: University of California Press Ltd., 1997, p. 10.

<sup>711</sup> Mitton G. Miller and Sylvan D. Schwartzman. *Our Religion and Our Neighbor*. New York: Union American Hebrew Congregation. 1965, p. 165.

<sup>712</sup> Maimonides formulated his thirteen principles of faith in his book *Guide to the Perplexed* which in CE 1200 he wrote in Arabic. It was subsequently translated in Hebrew and other languages. In his view these were fundamental to Jewish beliefs:

1. God exists and is the cause of all existing beings.
2. God's unity is absolute which cannot be compared with other units liable to division.
3. God is incorporeal and so the anthropomorphisms of the Bible should be understood metaphorically.
4. God is eternal, he is unity without beginning.
5. God alone should be worshipped.
6. Prophecy is distinction granted to human being of superior degree.
7. Moses was preeminent among the prophets.
8. Torah i.e. God's Law has divine origins.
9. God's Law cannot be abrogated.
10. God's knows in advance the actions of human beings.
11. God will reward for good and punish for evil.
12. The Messiah will come despite the long wait.
13. The resurrection of the dead

The source of these principles was Talmud. Although these principles were ignored by the Jewish community for some centuries, they are now widely held to be orthodox. Cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Vol-11. Cecil Roth et.al. (eds.). Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1978, p. 771.

<sup>713</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Vol-11, p. 776.



academic stay in America, Dr. Ambedkar must have also come into contact with Reformed Jews though he himself did not make this explicit. These Jews who were inspired by Maimonides had pushed their religion to roll in an irreversible forward direction. By 1940 a larger proportion of American Jewish adherents had accepted this reform.<sup>714</sup> What however is of further significance for our study is to note the gathering of Rabbis in 1885 at Pittsburg. Their acceptance of the centrality of God, a scientific and rational outlook on religion, the relative value of rituals and ceremonies, the rejection of rules regulating diet and dress, and an emphasis to work for justice<sup>715</sup> is in harmony with Dr. Ambedkar's approach to religion. This forward movement made Judaism a religion fit for modern society. Here the concern for protecting individuals was high on priority.

Attention should be drawn to assess how far these reforms affected the Indian Jews. Keeping in view the connection that Kochi Jews had maintained with their global Jewish family, the Reforms must have made headway here also. Though a detailed consideration of this subject is not our concern here, it is, nonetheless, surprising that the Indian Jewish community is not free from social discriminatory practices. The discrimination seems to lie on the distinction of colour. This trait is diametrically opposed to justice, which is basic to religion in modern society. Admittedly under such conditions the hope to restore the *selfhood* to the Dalits is very limited in the Indian Jewish fold.

Along with this, attention should be drawn to the pattern of social relationship between the Jewish groups, which it seems were structured on mutual exclusion after the fashion of caste. Did Dr. Ambedkar respond to this? I did not find his response to it. The reason was that he had neither considered converting to Judaism nor thought of it as a possible home for Dalits. I can see several reasons for this. Firstly, that one was expected to be born in the Jewish community, which is evident in rare conversions to it. Examples of conversions in North East India and Telugu State were exceptional. Secondly, there were no efforts to proselyte the people of India to Judaism as such. Thirdly, the Jewish people's self perception of being a Diaspora—though Indian and Jewish at once, and their yearning for a land of their own was fulfilled in their 'return' after the State of Israel was established.

Yet a solid reason, in my view, why Dr. Ambedkar would have rejected the option of Judaism was the practice of social segregation between *Gora* or white and *Kala* or black Jews.<sup>716</sup> The Dalit converts to Judaism would have continued to be adversely affected by this pattern of social structure. One may well be surprised that despite the egalitarianism of Mosaic Law, the Jewish community in India has been affected with social discriminatory practices. The community is divided between the

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<sup>714</sup> Miller and Schwartzman. *Our Religion and Our Neighbor*, p. 187.

<sup>715</sup> *ibid* Miller and Schwartzman. p. 187.

<sup>716</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics Vol-7*. James Hastings *et al* (editors). Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1915, p. 558.

*Gora* or white, and the *Kala* or the black Jews in such a way that they neither dine nor marry into each other's community. The *Gora* Jew regards their social status superior to the *Kala* Jews. This was confirmed by James Massey who records his visit to Kerala in his book *Roots*.<sup>717</sup> It may well be that *Gora* and *Kala* distinction in the Jewish community is racial and is also prevalent in Israel, however in the Indian context this blends itself with the caste like discrimination.

However, Walter Joseph Fischel, professor of Judaic Studies in the California University is more direct in his explanation. He points out that the Cochin Jews not only have been divided into three endogamous groups according to the traditions of their origins but the white and the black Jews even have separate synagogues. He underscores the tradition that the white Jews have a mixed Indo-European ancestry, the black Jews or *kala* have the same colouring as any other Indian and the freedman or *meshuhraim* are the freed slaves and their decedents.<sup>718</sup> Fischel observes that 'Influenced by the Indian caste system the three groups do not intermarry'. Clearly such ideas of ancestry reinforce inequality.<sup>719</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

ADMITTEDLY FOR HIM JUDAISM WAS AN ARCHETYPAL RELIGION OF AN ANTIQUE SOCIETY. This is in line with what we had earlier studied in Dr. Ambedkar's theory of religion.<sup>720</sup> Judaism being the earliest positive religion i.e. one with a founder was significant to lend support to his hypothesis on religion. On the basis of this I have pointed out that from his perspective Judaism stood uniquely among other religions. For him it was a bridge between a religion of savage society and civilized society. We have also considered that it has made the required shifts to modernity in the way Dr. Ambedkar had suggested in his *ten-shifts hypothesis* and norms of *utility* and *justice*.

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<sup>717</sup> James Massey describes his observations about the Indian Jews like this, 'On December 3, 1993, I visited in Cochin the locality known as Kochi (Jew Town) and visited the local synagogue also. During my visit I asked number of questions to local Jews and others. During this visit, I was told even there is separate worship place for the *Kala* (black) Jews, and there is very little social dealing among two groups'<sup>717</sup>. He goes on to describe that, 'Jews, both of Cochin and Bombay are divided into two main castes or *jatis* (groups) known as *Gora* (white) Jews and *Kala* (black) Jews ... these two groups of Jews, "did not interdine or intermarry, though they did worship in the same synagogues. Those of the higher *jati* claimed poorer Jewish ancestry. The lower, they alleged, was of mixed origins.'" James Massey. *Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 28.

<sup>718</sup> There is an interesting entry in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1903 under the Cochin which attests social inequality. It traces the origin of the Black Jews as mixed Indo-jewish ancestry. And so they were kept apart by the White Jews. The White Jews were privileged to possess slaves. Sometimes these slaves were circumcised and made free. These were the freedmen. It also records that not only did the White Jews have separate synagogues but through the British agent in court of the ruling prince of Cochin, they were allotted a separate place of burial at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. Cyrus Adler et. al. (editors), London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1903, p. 138.

<sup>719</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Vol-5. 1978, p. 621.

<sup>720</sup> See Chapter Two of this study 'Dr. Ambedkar's Dilemmas with Religion'.

It may well be that in his reading of the Bible he saw this and even got insights to construct his theory of religion. In this sense following the line of Dr. Ambedkar's reasoning one can say that Judaism is an egalitarian religion and keeps the protection of individuals on priority in its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. In other words it is focused on justice. Yet in the Indian context it had the Drawback of practicing discrimination within its community. By implication not all converts may have been welcomed into its fold. Along with this, its lack of political ambition due to their ambiguous feeling for its host culture vis-à-vis the messianic hope of a new country elsewhere made the Jews socially and politically irrelevant in the Indian context. It was incapable of offering any hope for Dalits to repossess their *selfhood*. For these reasons at least we can assert that Dr. Ambedkar could not have considered either converting or leading his community to join the Jewish fold.

In this line of investigation, therefore, if Judaism was not suitable for the Dalits then what could have been Dr. Ambedkar's option? We shall for the last time now turn our attention to our quest.

## Chapter Nine

### Response to Buddhists

#### 1. Introduction

Although religions in India had swerved from equality, the situation was not hopeless. There are some signs indicating this. Firstly, social inequality had not crystallized in the form of the caste system when the sacred writings of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* were being composed. In view of the fact that the mystical idea of realizing one reality permeating the transitory world is based on these sacred writings, we can see its potential to reinforce social equality also. Secondly, eventually when the *Brahmans*, or the priestly class, in their self interest did succeed to establish an unequal society, the *shramans*, or the working class, arose to oppose it too. So we have the *shramanic* tradition challenging and opposing the *brahmanic* tradition in the antique age.<sup>721</sup> Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the Buddha in line with the former had denounced the latter.

Buddha denounced the caste system. The caste system in its present form was not then existing. The bar against inter-dining and inter-marriage had not then become operative. Things were flexible and not rigid as they are now. But the principle of inequality which is the basis of the caste system had become well established and it was against this principle that Buddha carried on a determined and a bitter fight. How strongly was he opposed to the pretensions of the Brahmins for superiority over the other classes and how convincingly were the grounds of his opposition are to be found in many of his dialogues.<sup>722</sup>

This emphasis on equality had attracted Dr. Ambedkar's attention to Buddhism. Although he had not expressed his preference for it until last few years of his life but he had acquainted himself with it since his younger days.<sup>723</sup>

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<sup>721</sup> *Shraman* (*saman* in Pali) is derived from *shram* i.e. to exert in the religious discipline. For instance, in the Brihदारanyaka Upanishad it is used for the mendicants. But later the meaning of *shraman* was changed to connote the heterodox monks. Braj Ranjan Mani (A Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla) points out that in the Pali Buddhist literature, one comes across the double barreled word *shraman-brahman*, the first referring to all sorts of mendicants including the Buddhists, but the latter denoting upholders of the tradition of Vedas. The Buddha and the Mahavir, the founder of Jainism, are also called *shraman*. Subsequently their followers as well as all those opposed to the religion of Vedas were referred to as *shraman*. Cf. Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2011, p. 417.

<sup>722</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reformers and Their Fate' (1956), p. 204.

<sup>723</sup> D.C. Ahir points out that Dr. Ambedkar was given K.A. Keluskar's book *Buddha Charitra* i.e. Buddha's Life in Marathi when he was sixteen years old. In 1945 he attended a Buddhist Conference in Ahmadabad, on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1946 he founded the Siddhartha College (Buddha's name was Siddhartha Gautama) in Mumbai. In 1948 he wrote a foreword in Prof. L. Narasu's book *The Essence of Buddhism*. In 1950 participated in the first Buddhist procession in Delhi. With his influence he prevailed to introduce the Ashoka Chakra on the national flag of India and the emblem of three lions from an Ashokan pillar at Sarnath as the national emblem. Cf. B.A.M Paradkar. 'The Religious Quest of Ambedkar' in Ambedkar and *The Neo-Buddhist Movement*. Channai: The Christian Literature Society. 1972, p. 65.

Dr. Ambedkar's open and active involvement to promote Buddhism started in 1951 Dr. Ambedkar when he established the Buddhist Society of India. This added gravity to his declaration which he had made earlier on May 5, 1950 to embrace Buddhism along with his *Mahar* community. Once again on October 3, 1954 he broadcasted his preference for Buddhism on All India Radio.

Liberty, equality and fraternity is triplex that has guided my life, not the cliché used in the French Revolution or any other political system, but the one that is embedded deeply in Buddhist religion. The triplex also forms the basis of our Constitution. It works in political field, but it should also be used in our social relationships.<sup>724</sup>

This intention was reconfirmed when in December Dr. Ambedkar attended the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. Immediately he made his intention to convert to Buddhism clear at a celebration to mark the 2500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the Lord Buddha at Mandale in Myanmar where he went after the conference.<sup>725</sup> The advantage of Buddhism was that it was an international religion and was very strong in south Asian countries. It was also Indian in its origin. Although with the ascendancy of the Muslim rulers it had lost some grounds to Islam, it could not be obliterated. The encounters between these two religions were adequately close for the Muslims in Central Asia to call Buddhists *Shamaniyya* or *Sumaniyya* derived from *shramana*<sup>726</sup> and to absorb the word Buddha in the Arabic language reducing it to *But* to connote an idol. Admittedly the etymological source of *But* can be traced in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* of 1913 which, was the obvious source of Dr. Ambedkar's information.<sup>727</sup> Evidently the Buddhists were known for installing Buddha's statues of massive proportions.

The word '*But*' ... is an Arabic word and means an idol. Not many people however know what the derivation of the word '*But*' is. '*But*' is the Arabic corruption of the Buddha. Thus the origin of the word indicates that in the Moslem mind idol worship had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha. ... Before Islam came into being Buddhism was the religion of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar and Chinese Turkestan, as it was the whole Asia.<sup>728</sup>

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<sup>724</sup> Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. p. 205.

<sup>725</sup> *ibid*, Moon, p. 206.

<sup>726</sup> Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World of Religions*. London: Collins Publishers, 1987, p. 140.

<sup>727</sup> The entry in the Encyclopedia for '*But*' is '*Persian form of the Arabic BUDD*'; Similarly the entry for '*Budd*' is '*The word Budd or Buddha is used with various meanings. It is applied either to a pagoda, to Buddha himself, or to idols, not necessary figures of Buddha. ... BUDD or BUDDHA sometimes means Buddha in authors like Masudi, al-Biruni and Shahrastani. [Shahrastani] defines a BUDD as a person in this world, who is not born, does not marry, neither eats nor drinks and never grows old or dies; this definition evidently refers to incarnate or living Buddhas*'. Cf. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol-2. M.Th. Houtsma *et.al.* Leyden: International Association of the Academies. Late E.J. Brill Ltd., 1913, pp. 769 and 806.

<sup>728</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. '*The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*' (1956), *idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 230.

The evidence of vast Buddhist territories in Asia indicates its strength of being open to welcome diverse ethnic nationalities into its fold.

At Dehu when he installed a statue of Buddha, a gift from Rangoon, he said, “After 2500 years we are rejuvenating Buddhism in his own land. ... My mission in life is not over but has started anew”.<sup>729</sup> In view of the fact that Buddhism like many other world religions is of several types and denominations, we need to enquire what kind of Buddhism he accepted. What kind of *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* did he find there? Did he find the triplex—equality, liberty and fraternity, in Buddhism? In this chapter these issues will demand our attention. But first, we must quickly review what Dr. Ambedkar thought of Buddhism.

## 2 Stumbling Blocks for Buddhism

Let us discuss at length what Dr. Ambedkar perceived as shortcomings of the established Buddhist religion and what he saw as its strength. His criticisms of Buddhism were few but pointed. The aim of this was to help the learned Buddhists, both monks and lay, to change their unfriendly attitude and to lucidly present Buddhism to the public. In the section below we will discuss three drawbacks that Dr. Ambedkar brought to the fore. These were 1. the interpolation of irrational stories; 2. Unintelligible preachers; and 3. disinterest of the Buddhist countries to promote Buddhism.

### 2.1 Interpolation of Irrational Stories

The mass of Buddhist literature is so large that it is difficult to view Buddha’s life and teaching with clarity.<sup>730</sup> One can appreciate the enormity of Buddhist literature by the report in 1961 that the Thai translation of *Tripitaka* i.e. the Buddhist scriptures, was published in one hundred volumes.<sup>731</sup> This in Dr. Ambedkar’s view was due to the increasing repository in the literature which was not always rational or useful. Dr. Ambedkar presented four examples of this. These were 1. Buddha’s *Parivraja* or renunciation; 2. the Four Noble Truths; 3. the doctrine of karma and rebirth; and 4. the aim of *Bhikkhu* or Monk. From among these the first two are sufficient to explain Dr. Ambedkar’s point.

Let us take Dr. Ambedkar’s version of the story of Buddha’s renunciation as our first example. We know the traditional story that Gautama, when he saw a dead person, a sick person and an old person, was driven to reflect on life. If the decay of life caused *dukha* or misery, how then was one to be liberated from it? To find an answer Gautama undertook renunciation at the age of twenty-nine and departed in seclusion to meditate. Here he discovered the *dhamma* which could save humankind

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<sup>729</sup> Op Cit Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. p. 206.

<sup>730</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’ (1956), Introduction Page.

<sup>731</sup> H.G. Grether. ‘Buddhism in Thailand Today’ published in *Buddhist-Christian Encounter*. Colombo: Christian Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1961, p.10.

from the throes of misery. However, in Dr. Ambedkar's opinion this traditional answer to this question of renunciation was unsatisfactory.

The traditional answer is that he took Parivraja because he saw a dead person, a sick person and an old person. This answer is absurd in the face of it. The Buddha took Parivraja at the age of twenty-nine. If he took Parivraja as a result of these three sights, how is it he did not see these three sights earlier? These are common events occurring by hundreds and the Buddha could not have failed to come across them earlier. It is impossible to accept the traditional explanation that this was the first time he saw them.<sup>732</sup>

In his last book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* he gives an alternative version of for Buddha's renunciation. He pointed out that the reason for renunciation was Gautama's refusal to wage war for settling the dispute with the neighbouring State of Koliyas for sharing the waters of river Rohini. The Council did not vote in favour of Gautama but he decided not to yield from his position. He was not going to lead the army to war. As it was a disgrace for a prince not to participate in battle and that his family property was under threat of confiscation, Gautama, therefore, opted for a life of renunciation which was an acceptable alternative in his time.<sup>733</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar's opinion on the Four Noble Truths of Buddha's *Dhamma* shows a similar point. The present Dalai Lama, the supreme head of the Tibetan Buddhists, explains them for our days like this, 1. the truth of suffering; 2. the truth of (its) origin; 3. the truth of (its) cessation; and 4. the truth of the path.<sup>734</sup> The truth in this line of reasoning was this that suffering was inevitable yet one could overcome it. But in Dr. Ambedkar's opinion this did not constitute Buddha's teaching in the first place. In his estimation these Four Noble Truths were interpolations by monks.

If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor philosophy can help a man to achieve happiness in the world. If there is no escape from sorrow, then what can religion do, what can Buddha do to relieve man for such sorrow which is ever there in birth itself? The four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism.<sup>735</sup>

The inevitability of misery affirmed in the Four Noble Truths led Dr. Ambedkar to conclude that it denied hope to human beings. Clearly, by removing stories which did not meet his standard of rationality he was aiming for a radical version of Buddhism. At this point we need to raise two queries in particular. Firstly, was it possible to reconstruct Buddhism by recasting the figure of its messenger, the

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<sup>732</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), Introduction Page.

<sup>733</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 24

<sup>734</sup> The Dalai Lama. *The Way to Freedom*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers.1998, pp. 110-130.

<sup>735</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), Introduction Page.

content of his message, and the object of his monastic order? Secondly, what would the new image, the new content and the new object of Buddhism be? The significance of these two queries would be taken up in the light of the fact that Dr. Ambedkar offered an alternative religion—*Navayana* or the neo-Buddhism, which of his own making was moral and rational. We shall come to this later in detail, but now we turn our attention to the next point of our discussion.

## 2.2 Unintelligible Preachers

In Dr. Ambedkar's assessment, the Buddhist monks were not educating people in the teachings of the Buddha. This paucity in discharging their religious duty of teaching, led Dr. Ambedkar to ruthlessly denounce the *Sangha* or the monasteries, as enormous body of slothful monks.<sup>736</sup> In Sri Lanka he observed that the cloistered monks though disciplined to take only one meal a day did nothing else besides sitting quietly. He found that instead of reading books they slept in their rooms. Dr. Ambedkar recalled an occasion in Sri Lanka where he was invited to hear a monk. After the ceremonial reception the monk sat in a place specially prepared for him. In a most uninspiring manner he spoke briefly for a few minutes.

I went to Ceylon and I told some people that was particularly anxious to see how the Bhikkhus preached. ... They took me at 11 o'clock to one place; to small little square thing as big as this, a table and I sat on the ground. A *Bhikkhu* was brought in. Several men and women brought water and washed his feet and he came up and sat there. He had a fan with him, you see, God only knows what he said, of course, he must have preached in Singhalese. It was not more than two minutes, and after two minutes he departed.<sup>737</sup>

Plainly, the monks did nothing to spread their religion.<sup>738</sup> This situation needed to be corrected for which Dr. Ambedkar suggested that the Buddhists should emulate the sermons in the Christian churches.<sup>739</sup> Keeping in view that the above excerpt is from his speech on the November 20, 1956 at Kathmandu delivered only about thirty five days after his conversion to Buddhism, it is very interesting to note that Christianity still continued to provide him models for reviving Buddhism.

## 2.3 Disinterested Buddhist Countries

Dr. Ambedkar visited Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka not only to learn about Buddhism but also gain a sympathetic following for his cause to establish neo-Buddhism in India. However, the problem in these Buddhist countries was the general disinterest of their people to spread Buddhism in other parts of the world

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<sup>736</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha and The Future of His Religion' (1950), idem *Writings and Speeches*. Vol-17, Part-2. Mumbai: 2003, p. 107.

<sup>737</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956) Idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 557.

<sup>738</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956), p. 556.

<sup>739</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956), p. 557.



and the increasing influence of communism among their younger generation. He summed up both these issues in his speech in Kathmandu in 1956.

If the younger generation of the Buddhist countries are not able to appreciate that Buddhism supplies a way of life which is better than what is supplied by the communist way of life, Buddhism is doomed. It cannot last beyond a generation or two. It is, therefore, quite necessary for those who, believe in Buddhism to tackle the younger generation and to tell them whether Buddhism can be a substitute for communism. It is only then that Buddhism can hope to survive.<sup>740</sup>

Here Dr. Ambedkar surprises us with his scepticism. Keeping in view his participation in the celebration of 2500 years of the anniversary of Buddha's *Sasana* at Yangon (earlier Rangoon), it is impossible to hold that he was unaware of the resurgence of Buddhism in Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Attention should be drawn to the fact that Buddha's *Sasana Council* in Myanmar was constituted by the 1950 Act of Parliament initiated by the Prime Minister Mr. U Nu.<sup>741</sup> This was the sixth council of the Theravada tradition in line with the five historical Buddhist Councils.<sup>742</sup> The object of this Council was 1. to undertake the repair of the Pagodas and encourage the study of doctrine and meditation; 2. to publish and distribute Buddhist scripture and literature; and 3. to send missionaries to spread Buddhism. These were indications of Buddhist revival. In view of these facts, Dr. Ambedkar's warning seems incorrect.

Nonetheless, the question we should ask is this, why did Dr. Ambedkar express this anxiety? I offer two reasons for this. Firstly, that the threat that Buddhism could vanish from its traditional strongholds, for Dr. Ambedkar, was real. It must be admitted that Buddhism did disappear from Afghanistan and India and so his fears were not unfounded. Secondly, this was his desperate call for the revival of Buddhists. This revival was crucial to foster association of his neo-Buddhist community with them. This consciousness of belonging to a world community was important for their empowerment.

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<sup>740</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956), p. 550.

<sup>741</sup> Ela Bu. 'The Nature of Resurgence of Buddhism in Burma' published in *Buddhist-Christian Encounter*. Colombo: Christian Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1961, p. 4.

<sup>742</sup> Many articles in dictionaries, books and web are available on the Buddhist Councils. To understand the background we can list them here: the first Council at Rajgraha was convened shortly after Buddha died by King Ajatsatru; the second Council was sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century a hundred years later; the third Council was in C. 247 BEC at Patliputra now Patna convened by King Ashoka; the fourth Council was in C. 25 B.C.E. at Jalandhar or Kashmir convened by King Kanishka; the fifth Council was in CE 1871 at Mandalay in Myanmar convened by King Mindon and the sixth Council was in 1954 in Yangon formerly Rangoon convened by the decision of the Parliament of Myanmar where Dr. Ambedkar was also present. These Councils aimed to resolve disputes of doctrines, discipline and scriptures. Cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol-4. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1973, p. 358.

### 3 In Defence of Buddhism

In a brief response to the query *Why I like Buddhism*, Dr. Ambedkar identified three points that Buddhism offers in combination. These were *prajna* or rationality, *karuna* or love and *samata* or equality. Following his perspective of religion, Dr. Ambedkar argued that these three were basic to preserve society.<sup>743</sup> By implication, the combination and balance of these three was the strength of Buddhism. Accordingly let us study each of them.

#### 3.1 Rationality in the Religious Lore (Prajna)

Dr. Ambedkar showed how Buddha used Kapila's method of *samkhaya* philosophy to prove the untenable nature of many things that were at his time treated reverently as righteous duties or *dharma*. We may recall a similar approach of Karl Marx two millennia later who had used Hegel's method to demonstrate his point.<sup>744</sup> Now Kapila was a well known sage-philosopher in ancient India.<sup>745</sup> He had worked out a philosophy of cognition which became known as *samkhaya*.<sup>746</sup> We can reduce his ideas on this subject into two basic propositions:

1. Truth must be supported by proof.
2. Proof has only two valid ways:
  - i. Perception and/or
  - ii. Inference: There are three types of inferences:
    1. Infer from cause to effect: e.g. clouds cause rains to occur.
    2. Infer from effect to cause: e.g. swelling streams in valley is the effect of rains on hills.
    3. Infer by analogy: e.g. a person alters his position when he moves, so the stars also alter their position when they move.

It should be admitted that Kapila's epistemology coincided with Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on *prajna* or rationality as a hallmark of a good religion. In other words a good religion was free of superstitions emanating from irrational ideas of the supernatural. Later we shall see that on the basis of this rationality Dr. Ambedkar listed out eight elements in religion under which he drew a line of irrelevance. These

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<sup>743</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Why I Like Buddhism' (1956), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 515.

<sup>744</sup> Bertrand Russell. *A History of Western Philosophy*. London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979, p. 750.

<sup>745</sup> Kapila was a philosopher in antiquity i.e. time of the Vedas. He had propounded the *samkhaya* philosophy which analyzed reality as the *experience* and the *experienced*. The one who experiences is the *purusha* and what is experienced in the *prakriti* or *jad*. Purusha is conscious and imperishable whereas the *prakriti* is unconscious and fleeting. This system of philosophy also propounds the three *gunas* or qualities of *prakriti*, namely *sattva* (noble), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (dark). These three qualities are held in a balance in *prakriti*, but if the balance is disturbed and one quality dominate the other it results in disturbance in the *prakriti*.

<sup>746</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 84.

added nothing to the wisdom of religion and therefore could be abandoned by people.

### 3.2 Love for all Sentient Beings (Karuna)

Having mentioned *karuna* or compassion as Buddha's significant teaching Dr. Ambedkar did not elaborate this theme in his writings. What we have is the glimpse of this in the stories which he incorporated in his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. One among these is Buddha's childhood story of saving a wounded bird. Siddhartha who accidentally received this wounded bird took care of it. When Devadutta claimed the ownership of his bird, Siddhartha refused to give it to him. The case went to an arbitrator who upheld Siddhartha's argument that the one who protects life had the right to own it.<sup>747</sup> Not only does this story inspire compassion but its lesson is applicable for wider ecological concerns, for instance, to preserve wild life.

### 3.3 Equality for all Human Beings (Samata)

Dr. Ambedkar's stand on *samata* or equality can be demonstrated in the way he developed his argument against the caste-system from his Buddhist perspective. Charging the caste system as the root and foundation of social inequality in India he selected some interesting texts from the *Assalayana Sutta*. The weight of his choice is obvious from the content of the texts. It is interesting to note in this *Sutta* how on the principle of universality, Buddha argued against the prevalence of the caste system of those times. His first argument was the universal similarity of human anatomy.<sup>748</sup> As all human beings had similar process of procreation none could be inferior. The second was the universal similarity of two tier social system—servants and masters.<sup>749</sup> Therefore, the four tier *chaturvarna* which later became the caste system was wrong. Third was the universal similarity of the division of labour, and so the division of labourers in the caste system was not correct.<sup>750</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the relevance of a religion was to be judged by its morality i.e. to protect all people—both the feeble and the able—equally. He accepted that in the nature the fittest survives. However, as far as the society is concerned, the fittest were not always the best. He, therefore, argued that a moral religion treated everyone equally and so in the society it protected the weak along with all the rest in the struggle for existence. This helped the best to survive in society. In this way religion was both *useful* and *just*.

Men are born unequal. ... All have to enter in to what is called the struggle for existence. In the struggle for existence if inequality be recognized as the rule of the game the weakest will always go to the wall. Should this rule of inequality be allowed to be the

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<sup>747</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), Introduction Page.

<sup>748</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 302.

<sup>749</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 303.

<sup>750</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 305.

rule of life? Some answer in the affirmative on the ground that it results in the survival of the fittest. The question however is: Is the fittest the best from the point of view of society? No one can give a positive answer. It is because of this doubt that religion preaches equality. For equality may help the best to survive even though the best may not be the fittest. It is, therefore, the primary reason why religion upholds equality. This was the viewpoint of the Buddha and it was because of this that he argued that a religion which does not preach equality was not worth having.<sup>751</sup>

Buddhist egalitarianism was a fine example of this useful role of religion in society. We can, therefore, understand the reason for his insistence for his followers to undertake the practice of neo-Buddhism enthusiastically. Unless this was done neither social transformation could occur nor could moral conscience be cultivated. In Dr. Ambedkar's reasoning social transformation alone could ensure a successful democracy and restoration of the *selfhood* of the dispossessed Dalits.

#### **4 Dr. Ambedkar's Alternative: Neo-Buddhism**

We have discussed both the adequacies and inadequacies of traditional Buddhism. In the light of this, the question before Dr. Ambedkar was, what could Buddhism offer Dalits? Would it help them to repossess their *selfhood*? None among the variety of Buddhists he assessed were suitable for Dalits. For example, the innumerable Buddhas of Mahayana were akin to the Hindu avatars. Worship of such deities would not emancipate a Dalit from superstitions. What Dalits needed was a religion which not only promoted justice but also offered a messenger, a message and a community. But Buddhists, having vanished from India, had none of these to offer. In comparison to Christians and Sikhs, the Buddhists were socially insignificant and politically powerless. In fact there was no Buddhist ecclesiastical body except the one in Kushenara in Gorakhpur District that admitted him into the Buddhist fold.<sup>752</sup>

However, Dr. Ambedkar did not count these deficiencies as adequate reasons to reject Buddhism. The fact that Buddhism was indigenous was an advantage that surpassed all drawbacks. Now there were two tasks before him: first, to draw up a scheme for a new Buddhism for the Dalits to adopt and second, to convince them to convert to it. The hope was that neo-Buddhism would facilitate the emergence of a just society in India. So let us see how Dr. Ambedkar envisaged this new religion.

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<sup>751</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 308.

<sup>752</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 525. What we have here is Dr. Ambedkar's formal letter, dated September 26, 1956, to Bhikku Chandramani, the oldest Buddhist Monk in India at that time, to officiate at his conversion ceremony in Nagpur.

#### 4.1 It would be Moral

Instead of a deity, neo-Buddhism would have morality at its centre. Accordingly Dr. Ambedkar drew up an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* for neo-Buddhism on the moral values of equality, freedom, dignity, kinship and compassion. His list of twenty five points can be reduced to the following five:<sup>753</sup>

1. Removing the supernatural and superstitious elements from religion.
2. Placing morality and human-beings at the centre of religion.
3. Defining the function of religion as 'the reconstruction of society' with the objective to make it a good place for all:
  - i. By developing a spirit of non-possessiveness for private property.
  - ii. By treating all human-beings as equal.
  - iii. By respecting human dignity.
  - iv. By encouraging fellowship among people
  - v. By ensuring that learning is accompanied with character building.
4. Accepting the fact of transitory nature of the world.
5. Justifying war only for justice, and ensuring that the victor discharges his/her duty towards the vanquished.

It is clear that this content of neo-Buddhism was close to the ideals of Christianity and Islam. In this line of thinking he envisaged to introduce a new form of religion in India *Navayana* i.e. neo-Buddhism.

#### 4.2 It would have Monastic Communities

Keeping in view that monastic communities have been the hallmark of Buddhism, let us draw our attention to their relevance as Dr. Ambedkar had visualized. The first was that these communities would be miniature models of a democratic society. The monks in their associated life would have three things, i.e., equality, fraternity and democracy. In this way they would demonstrate the ideals of the Buddha's teaching of egalitarianism and kinship for all to emulate. In their practice of democracy, the monastic communities would also set forth ideals for a free civil society. However, Dr. Ambedkar did not mean creating a perfect person in these communities; rather a monk was to be a social servant. He would serve the people by being their friend, philosopher and guide.<sup>754</sup> He knew that living for perfection was consistent with Buddhist monastic tradition, but becoming a social servant was not.<sup>755</sup>

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<sup>753</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956). Mumbai: 2003, p. 442.

<sup>754</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), Introduction Page.

<sup>755</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), Introduction Page

A second important feature of these monastic communities would be their heterogeneous nature. Dr. Ambedkar visualized people of diverse social backgrounds and statuses joining and being welcomed into its fellowship. In his speech on the occasion of his conversion Dr. Ambedkar implicitly appealed that what was practiced from the earliest inception of Buddhism, namely unity and equality, the Buddhists should faithfully practice it in the modern society too.

In the Buddhist religion 75% *Bhikkus* were Brahmins. 25% were the *Shudras* and others. But the Lord Buddha said, “O *Bhikkus*, you have come from different countries and castes. Rivers flow separately when they flow in their provinces, but they lose their identity when they meet the sea. They become one and the same. The Buddhist *Sangh* is like an ocean. In this *Sangh* all are equal.” After they merge into the ocean; it is not possible to identify the water of Ganga or Mahanadi. Similarly when we join the *Buddha Sangh*, we lose our caste and become equal.<sup>756</sup>

The advantage of Buddha’s message of equality and unity for Dalits was such that Dr. Ambedkar strongly advocated a systematic dissemination of its message. As a matter of considerable urgency this was to be undertaken in the manner of Christian missionary enterprise.<sup>757</sup> The significance of this effort for Dalits lies in gaining their social dignity and recovering their *selfhood*. Among Dalits, a consequence of this would be their change of thinking. This would not only be explicit in their developed self-esteem but also in their new moral conscience, i.e. to protect the dignity and interests of other disadvantaged people. It was clear that Dr. Ambedkar’s neo-Buddhism was to be founded on social morality of egalitarianism and kinship, not on speculation or theology.

#### **4.3 It would Welcome the Poor**

Dalits have been adversely affected by perennial poverty. Dr. Ambedkar’s *Mahar* community was no exception to this. Now the question with which the members of the dominant castes confronted Dr. Ambedkar was this, was not the Dalit’s desire of economic prosperity a morally dubious reason to convert to another religion? The reason why the question of morality arises here is because ‘desire’ itself suggests victim’s vulnerability to an unfair play of inducement. But Dr. Ambedkar was not prepared to answer this before inquiring ‘who was it who was asking this question?’ Obviously, the question of religious conversion by inducement was raised by those who enjoyed the status of dominant castes. Dr. Ambedkar suspected that discouraging the Dalits to convert to another religion, especially the poor, was designed to keep them trapped under the sway of the caste system. For the

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<sup>756</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World’ (1956), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 17, Part-3, 2003, p. 540.

<sup>757</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Buddha and the Future of His Religion’ (1950), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 17, Part-2, 2003, p.107.

dominant castes to raise the issue of poverty to halt religious conversion of Dalits was unacceptable to Dr. Ambedkar. In line with the *shramanic* tradition Dr. Ambedkar contended that it was necessary for the Dalits to adopt a religion that would generate hope to enable them to live.

Religion is necessary for the poor. Religion is necessary of the Depressed people. The poor man survives on hope. The root of life lies in hope. What will happen to the life if the hope is lost? Religion makes [poor people] hopeful, and gives a message to the Depressed and the poor—do not be afraid, life will be hopeful, it will be! Therefore, the poor and the depressed mankind cling to the religion.<sup>758</sup>

But if one accepts Dr. Ambedkar's position does that not raise concern about the quality of a religion's adherents? This question also came from the members of the dominant castes. It begged an answer especially in the light of the fact that the aim of those who worked for enhancing the numerical strength of adherents were often keen to have educated and dignified people join their fold. Conversely Dr. Ambedkar found that this was not the case when Christianity had entered Europe. Then its adherents were chiefly those who suffered social disadvantages.

When the Christian religion entered Europe, the condition of Rome and neighbouring countries was very distressful. People could not get enough food. ... Who became the followers of the Christ? Poor and depressed people. The poor and lower class of Europe became Christian.<sup>759</sup>

Two issues in particular embedded in Dr. Ambedkar's argument deserve our attention here. Firstly, that there was nothing wrong with a religion that offered succour to the poor and secondly, there is nothing wrong with those people who convert to such a religion. In fact it would be unjust to prohibit the poor to convert to a religion of benefit to them. This was his answer to those who opposed conversion, especially of the Dalits, to an egalitarian religion. The basic point in this discussion was that the initiative of the poor, and not the rich, to join the neo-Buddhist religion in Dr. Ambedkar's opinion, was reasonable.

#### **4.4 It would develop mind**

One more essential thing for a good religion according to Dr. Ambedkar was facilitating the development of the mind. We have already seen in our study earlier that for Dr. Ambedkar religion was not unqualified, it was either good or bad. A bad religion of inequality leaves a person in a state of mental disorganization. But cultivating a good mind with the aid of a just religion allows the possibility for Dalits to flourish. The importance of cultivating the human mind was not to be

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<sup>758</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956), p. 541.

<sup>759</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956), p. 541.

underestimated for the simple reason that this faculty was extremely limited in the animals.

Buffalo and bull need fodder every day. Man also needs food. But the difference in between the two is that buffalo and bull have no mind; man has body and mind too. Therefore, both should be pondered over. The mind should be developed. The mind should be cultured.<sup>760</sup>

What Dr. Ambedkar adds to the cultivation of mind is the element of enthusiasm. This is a state of mind which is associated with emotions is the fruition of socio-economic progress. As is evident no individual can flourish without such progress, and no individual can be enthusiastic without flourishing. Dr. Ambedkar saw linkages between a person's mind, religion, progress and enthusiasm. Together these developed confidence in a person.

Why man's (*sic!* a person's) body or mind is ill? The reasons are, either his body is diseased or his mind has no enthusiasm. If there is no enthusiasm in mind there is no progress. Why is not this enthusiasm there? The first reason is that man has been kept in such a way that he does not get any opportunity or he has no hope to rise. That time, how will he remain enthusiastic? He remains diseased. The man (*sic!*) who gets the fruit of his deed can get enthusiasm. ... The root of creating enthusiasm is in mind, whose body and mind also are healthy, who is courageous, who has confidence in surmounting all adversities, in him only enthusiasm is generated and he only excels. ... A strange philosophy has been incorporated in the Hindu religion which can never promote enthusiasm. Circumstances making men (*sic!*) unenthusiastic have been maintained for thousands of years, and then at the most such people will be produced who would fill their stomach by clerical jobs.<sup>761</sup>

Conversely the religion that Dr. Ambedkar led his people to, at the *Deekshasthala* in Nagpur City, was designed to help them gain emotional confidence. This was essential because without nurturing emotional confidence in religion, Dalits would lack the enthusiasm which was essential for their wellbeing. What was left unsaid by Dr. Ambedkar was that the mood of enthusiasm was the result of meaningful engagement of an individual in society which resulted from as well as helped to make justice flourish.

In this line of thinking Dr. Ambedkar had decided to emancipate his people by leading them into neo-Buddhism, a religion based on justice and designed to instil enthusiasm. He had hoped that the adherents of this religion would be both empowered and enthused. They would, on the one hand, be empowered to resist oppression and, on the other be enthusiastic to celebrate lives of equality and

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<sup>760</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956, p. 537.

<sup>761</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956), p. 537.



dignity. These two inner states would emanate from a healthy mind that was free from inferiority complex and social isolation. The consequence of psychological health would be the economic and intellectual flourishing of Dalits.

#### 4.5 It would follow Christianity

The events of Dr. Ambedkar's life after 1950 show that he was now seriously studying Buddhism and he felt no hesitation to openly express his dissatisfaction with Christ's claim to be God's Son.<sup>762</sup> Over and against this he found Buddha's insistence to be nothing more than one who showed the way to salvation as more convincing.<sup>763</sup> Yet attention should be drawn to his admittance that Buddhists should regard Christians as their role model. This advice was not in passing rather its seriousness can be gauged from his insistence on it in his writing in 1954 and 1955 and also after his conversion in 1956. At the second instance Ambedkar while insisting in having a Buddhist initiation ceremony like Christian baptism and ordination, firmly stated that 'in this respect the new movement for the propagation of Buddhism in India must copy Christianity'.<sup>764</sup> In this matter he considered no other religion or organization as appropriate.

Bhikku Sangha must borrow some of the features of the Christian priesthood particularly the Jesuits. Christianity has spread in Asia through service—educational and medical. This is possible because the Christian priest is not merely versed in religious lore but because he is also versed in Arts and Science. This was really the ideal of the Bhikkus of olden times.<sup>765</sup>

In this line of reasoning he mapped some specific details of ways in which this would be done. In our list of these features below we will use *dhamma* in Pali for the Buddhist ideal to highlight its distinctiveness from *dharma* its Sanskrit equivalent.<sup>766</sup>

- i. A *dhamma* of Buddha, like the gospel of Jesus Christ, should be concise containing his moral and social teachings.
- ii. A Buddhist initiation ceremony for the laity like the Christian baptism.
- iii. Appointment of lay preachers like Christian catechists.
- iv. Establishment of a Buddhist Religious Seminary like Christian Seminaries for priests.

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<sup>762</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion' (1950), p. 95.

<sup>763</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha and the Future of His Religion' (1950). 95.

<sup>764</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddhism Disappeared from India Due to Wavering Attitude of the Laity' (1955) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-1. Mumbai: 2003, p. 430.

<sup>765</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddha And The Future Of His Religion (1950), p. 107.

<sup>766</sup> To deconstruct the preeminence of Sanskrit language Braj Ranjan Mani has argued that in the literature of the Vedas the word *dharma* does not occur. However, its use was popularized only after Buddha's time. He writes that, 'Brahman priests and grammarians may well have fashioned the word in imitation of the Pali term, *dhamma*'. Cf. Mani. *Debrahmanising History*, p. 418. Also read HaBir Angar Ee. *Pali is the Mother of Sanskrit*. Nagpur: Tarachand Chavhan, 1994.

- v. Sunday Worship in *Vihara* should have a sermon.
- vi. Establishment of High Schools and Colleges, on the pattern of Christian institutions, under Buddhist management.
- vii. Literary works, like inviting people to write essays on Buddhist topics, in order to increase interest of the people in Buddhism.<sup>767</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar carefully followed up each proposal. He succeeded to prepare a concise edition of Buddha's life and teachings. Initially he called it *The Buddha and His Gospel*. This book patterned on the scheme of the Christian gospels started with Buddha's genealogy, his birth and childhood stories, his temptations and going out as a seeker till he attains enlightenment and becomes a Buddha. Then he preaches his philosophy and gains disciples, finally his death. Subsequently Dr. Ambedkar changed the title of this book to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In a similar proposed pattern he designed a ceremony of initiation, like the Christian baptism, for Buddhists. The conversion ceremony had no rituals but three components, namely ascription in praise of Buddha with the Intention, the Resolve and the Promises. The first component started with an attribution of praise was followed by a recitation of *Trisharan* i.e. seeking refuge in *the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha*. The second component was the recitation of the famous *Pancha Sila*. This was the recitation of the resolve to follow the five precepts of Buddha and finally the Promise to abide by a list of twenty directives. This list was drawn up by Dr. Ambedkar. It is very interesting to note its resemblance to the Ten Commandments of Moses in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The reason Dr. Ambedkar suggested that the Monks should be trained to become preachers of *dhamma* was due to his realisation of the imperative to impart Buddhist teaching not only to the unconverted but also to thousands of Dalits who had embraced Buddhism with him on October 14, 1956 at *Deeksha Bhoomi* Nagpur. A fortnight later in a letter to Valisinha, he suggested two ways to do this. The first model was the Roman Catholic missionaries and social preachers.<sup>768</sup> The idea was to train the monks after this pattern. The second model was the Protestants. Keeping in view that celibacy had a limited appeal to Indian youth his idea was to have an order of married priests too.<sup>769</sup> Similarly, a year earlier on January 11, 1955, he had announced the starting of a Buddhist seminary in Bangalore, obviously after the

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<sup>767</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print' (1954) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 508.

<sup>768</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Bhikkhus Should Serve the Buddha by Becoming Preachers of His Dhamma' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-1. Mumbai: 2003, p. 446.

<sup>769</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Bhikkhus Should Serve the Buddha by Becoming Preachers of His Dhamma' (1956), p. 447.

pattern of a Christian theological seminary. For this he had obtained help from the World Buddhist Mission, Myanmar.<sup>770</sup>

Be this as it may, his own intellectual conflicts arising out of the contentions he saw between Christianity and Buddhism needed to be addressed. Was there a possible way to hold the two traditions together? He did in a way to address the conflict of his conscience. How he did this is clear in his article which he wrote in 1950 for the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Kathmandu. He claimed that Christianity freely borrowed from Buddhism, therefore, now Buddhists should liberally take from it. It is very interesting to see that he wouldn't allow Buddhists to borrow ideas from any other religion except Christianity. Obviously if he claimed Christianity to be almost wholly based on Buddhism then it was legitimate and safe for Buddhists to be close to Christians and none other. Significantly he stated this soon after his conversion to Buddhism.

You will be probably surprised to know that 90 percent of Christianity is copied from Buddhism both in substance and in form ... There is so much to it, I think time has turned and we must now copy some of the ways of the Christians in order to propagate our religion among the Buddhist people.<sup>771</sup>

But if we accept Dr. Ambedkar's position, can we consider Christianity as anything but an extension of Buddhism? In view of the discussions that surround close resemblances between certain stories of Christ and the Buddha, Dr. Ambedkar could have maintained a neutral stand. Now while it is certainly true that an encounter between Buddhism and Christianity is afforded by many similarities in their narratives, such as the visitation of the wise sages at Christ's as well as at Buddha's birth, Simeon's and Asita's story surrounding the birth narratives of the two, the conversion of Zacchaeus the tax collector by Christ and the conversion of Angulaimala the robber by Buddha, and temptations of Christ by the Tempter and of Buddha by a woman, but that does not override the possibility of parallel development of two entirely independent religious traditions.

However, it is remarkable that there were no borrowings of Buddhist philosophical ideas in the New Testament. For instance John's gospel employed *logos* and *theos* Greek concepts but not *nirvana* as was the case with the *Bhagavada Gita*.<sup>772</sup> Now while it is true that religious and philosophical ideas do get disseminated across the globe, still, the Jewish root of Christianity is an undeniable fact. Keeping this in view Dr. Ambedkar's assertion that Christianity had mostly borrowed from Buddhism was farfetched and wrong.

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<sup>770</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddhist Seminary to be Started in Bangalore' (1955), *idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-1. Mumbai; 2003, p. 428.

<sup>771</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Buddha or Karl Marx' (1956), p. 557.

<sup>772</sup> 'Krishna And His Gita' (1956), *idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 369.

However, the unstated point of his claim was to appropriate the best of these two traditions to deploy it for the emancipation of Dalits and restoration of their *selfhood*. In a curious but concrete way he perceived the relationship between these two religions as if one facilitated the other in order to flourish. In this way he reached an intellectual reconciliation at the end of his life where he could hold and cherish both religions, Christianity and Buddhism, together in his mind. The former had always inspired him and the latter had completely convinced him.

In more recent times, neo-Buddhism has established itself as a religion across the country but mostly in the Maharashtra State in central India. It is estimated that the three million Hindus who had turned to neo-Buddhism, were mainly from the Dalit communities of *Mahars*, *Jatavs*, *Chamars* spread all over U.P., Punjab, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir. Its remarkable growth was noted in census records also. The percentage jumped from 0.05% (1951 census) to 0.74% (1961 census). However a drop to 0.70% was noted in the 1971 census. The reason being that in several places large numbers of neo-Buddhists were reconverted back to Hinduism. Interestingly 12,000 neo-Buddhists from Kolhapur (south of Mumbai) had approached the Church of North India seeking baptism in 1971.<sup>773</sup> Presently the neo-Buddhists have established numerical stability.

## 5 Gautama Buddha in Dr. Ambedkar's Perception

In view of the fact that Dr. Ambedkar had decided to convert to Buddhism, the question of buddhology was foundational. For him the buddhahood of Siddhartha Gautama was not to be understood in esoteric terms, e.g. that he was a manifestation of an eternal and transcendental entity.<sup>774</sup> Instead, it was to be understood in social terms. In line with his definition of religion i.e. that which provides a an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* so that the social order is made a moral order, the details of this we have studied in chapter two, Siddhartha Gautama was one who expounded a moral design of social life. On the basis of this Siddhartha Gautama engaged to reform the society of his times. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar described Buddha as the first greatest social reformer.

The first social reformer and the greatest of them all is Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. Any history of Social Reform must begin with him and no history of Social Reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements.<sup>775</sup>

But if we accept Dr. Ambedkar's position regarding Siddhartha Gautama, then can we regard as him as Buddha at all? Now, Buddha, etymologically both in Pali and

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<sup>773</sup> *World Christian Encyclopaedia Vol-1*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) David B Barrett et. al. (editors) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 363.

<sup>774</sup> Klaus K. Klostermaier. *Buddhism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006, p. 39.

<sup>775</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reformers and their Fate' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches Vol-3*. Mumbai: 1987, p. 165.

Sanskrit means the Enlightened One.<sup>776</sup> In recent times Akizuki Ryomin, a scholar-monk and a professor at Hanazono University in Japan, has also raised a discussion with regard to the nature of the Buddha also called the *Sakyamuni*. He distinguishes the *Sakyamuni* of history from *Sakyamuni* the Buddha. Keeping in line with the Mahayana Buddhism, this Zen master explains that the former was the manifestation of the latter who is eternal.<sup>777</sup> Not so with Dr. Ambedkar who in spite of knowing the weight of Buddhist orthodoxy, nevertheless proceeded to fill his buddhology with social content. Accordingly when describing Siddhartha Gautama's social background he departed from the traditional stories associated with it. Dr. Ambedkar's approach to Buddha begins first by knowing Siddhartha Gautama as a human being, which will help us to correctly understand him as the enlightened one i.e. The Buddha. Accordingly we will study Ambedkar's buddhology under three sections: Gautama Buddha as a human being, a moral being and a social reformer.

### 5.1 A Human Being

It is very interesting to note the precision with which Dr. Ambedkar elaborated the life and works of Buddha. He replaced the super-sacred aura and provided a human face to the Buddha.<sup>778</sup> The details of his royal lineage and the year of his birth in 563 B.C.E. placed the Buddha in the common history of humanity.<sup>779</sup> Similarly, Dr. Ambedkar placed him in a human family. His father's name was Suddhohana and mother's name was Mahamaya who had an extraordinary dream of his birth. She died a week after her delivery and Siddhartha was raised by his step mother Prajapati Gautami. For Dr. Ambedkar it was important to show that the Buddha was not only a human being but also a prince of worth. A prince-philosopher would prove a compelling icon for Dalits to emulate, to take pride in and to associate with. Dr. Ambedkar in his narrative brings a surprising turn by showing Buddha's prowess in archery as a young prince to win Yeshodhara, a princess, to be his wife. He married her at the age of sixteen. Subsequently Rahula his son was born when Siddhartha Gautama was twenty nine years old.<sup>780</sup> He died of food poisoning at the ripe old age of eighty years. Dr. Ambedkar depicted his death as a serene passing of a great soul on a full moon night. There was nothing

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<sup>776</sup> Klostermaier. *Buddhism*, p. 218.

<sup>777</sup> Akisuki Ryomin. *New Mahayana: Buddhism for a Post-Modern World*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press. 1990, p. 52.

<sup>778</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp. 1-99.

<sup>779</sup> Concerning the dates of Gautama Buddha, Klostermaier makes the following observation, 'Unit recently Western scholars were in agreement that the life of Buddha spanned the period of c. 540-480 BCE. The Buddhists world, however, celebrated the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buddha's *parinibbana* in 1956, assuming the Buddha to have lived from 624 to 544 B.C.E.'. Cf. Klostermaier. *Buddhism*, p. 5.

<sup>780</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp 1-13.

dramatic as such, except to know that the Buddha was already there where death was to take him. And so he was called the *tathagat*.

### 5.2 A Moral Being

The reason why Dr. Ambedkar included instances of Siddhartha's moral courage was to show his ideals even before he attained enlightenment. Two instances suffice. The first story, as we have already mentioned earlier, is of Siddhartha's insistence in the legislative assembly to refute the general decision for waging war against Koliyas to settle dispute over the diversion of water of river Rohini.<sup>781</sup> He argued that the dispute should be settled through diplomacy and dialogue with the Koliyas. The danger of consequence of his stand against the majority members of this legislative assembly was serious. This Siddhartha was prepared to accept the consequences but was not ready to compromise. The second story was his voluntary decision to take *parivrajya* i.e. renunciation.<sup>782</sup> This decision was seriously weighed in the light of the other two options i.e. penalty of death or confiscation of family property. In both these options the innocent family members would be the victims. Siddhartha therefore took a moral decision to opt for the penalty that would not cause the innocent people to suffer. This story, in Dr. Ambedkar's view, stressed morality for constituting a good religion.

### 5.3 A Social Reformer

It is very interesting to note that Dr. Ambedkar took the *Brahminic* literature especially the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, *Gita*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* as a reliable source for constructing the social life of the Aryans in antiquity.<sup>783</sup> He found narratives of degraded social practices of the Aryan people in the above literary works. These were 1. Excessive gambling; 2. Addiction to intoxicating drinks like soma and sura; 3. Ruinous interclass wars between Brahmin and Kshatriya; 4. Sexual perversion like incest, cohabitation, renting of women, prelibation, and bestiality; and 5. Animal sacrifices resulting in mass slaughter of livestock.<sup>784</sup>

What Dr. Ambedkar found was that philosophers like Jaimini and Bhadraryana did not disapprove or refute the practices of social inequality, caste discrimination and cultural domination. He wrote that Buddha's stand against caste inequality was started even before inter-dining and inter-marriages were banned. He underlined the tacit approval of caste system by the Brahmins till the coming of Buddha. We have seen earlier the well accepted fact now that Buddha in line with the *shramanic* tradition had opposed and denounced the social inequality of the *brahmanic* tradition as it had existed in his times.

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<sup>781</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 24.

<sup>782</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 28.

<sup>783</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Literature Of Brahmanism' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 239.

<sup>784</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reformers And Their Fate' (1956), pp. 168-176.

Dr. Ambedkar identified three things against which Buddha had campaigned. These were belief in the authority of *Vedas*, belief in the efficacy of animal sacrifices and belief in the system of caste to order the society.<sup>785</sup> In other words these were neither useful nor just for society or individuals, and therefore inadequate to assist Dalits regain their lost *selfhood*. A successful curtailment of these three could result in winning social reform. He demonstrated the strength of his argument by presenting the stories of *Jatakmalā*, *Kutadanta Sutta* and *Ambattha Sutta* in detail. If on the one hand a reader complains of the length of these stories then on the other their advantage as a good sample of Buddhist literature should also be considered. Whatever one may argue concerning the length of the reproduction of Buddhist *Suttas* by Dr. Ambedkar, the fundamental point of his assertion was that he had undertaken to refute in contemporary *Brahminic* society what Buddha had refuted in the antique Aryan society.

## 6 The Dhamma of Buddha According to Dr. Ambedkar

Dr. Ambedkar drew a line under *dhamma* as the heart of Buddhism without which it would have no special message.<sup>786</sup> Admittedly the social nature of Buddha's message gave it a special flavour. Buddha had addressed the social problems of hatred, inequality, slavery and discrimination.

The question that arises is "Did the Buddha have no Social Message?" When pressed for an answer, students of Buddhism refer to the two points. They say, "The Buddha taught Ahimsa." "The Buddha taught peace!" Asked—"Did the Buddha give any other Social Message?" "Did the Buddha teach justice? Did the Buddha teach love? Did the Buddha teach liberty? Did the Buddha teach equality? Did the Buddha teach fraternity? Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?" The questions are hardly ever raised in discussing the Buddha's *Dhamma*. My answer is that the Buddha has a Social Message. He answers all these questions. But they have been buried by modern authors.<sup>787</sup>

To answer these queries Dr. Ambedkar turned to the doctrine of *dhamma* and examined its three categories namely *dhamma*, *adhamma* and *saddhamma*.<sup>788</sup> We must

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<sup>785</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reformers And Their Fate' (1956), p. 188.

<sup>786</sup> What comes out here is the centrality of the Law of *Kamma* or Causation as an essential and unique doctrine of Buddhism. This law explains the reality of phenomenal world which Dr. Ambedkar pointed out was the heart of *Dhamma* without which Buddhism would have no social message. Now the question to ask is this, were the doctrines *dhamma* and *kamma* traditionally regarded as of singular importance? The answer may not be as straight forward as Dr. Ambedkar makes out to be, but it certainly undergirds the Buddhist worldview over which for centuries the superstructures of cult and rituals have been constructed. However, the perspective that governed his understanding of Buddhism arose out of Buddha's social message. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 250.

<sup>787</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 226.

<sup>788</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 226.

note that he understood *dhamma* as righteousness i.e. just relationship between people in all spheres of life.<sup>789</sup>

### 6.1 What is Dhamma?

Dr. Ambedkar noted that initially *dhamma* had nothing to do with belief in God; instead it was connected to *kamma* or human action. As both *dhamma* and *kamma* were human activities, the Buddhist tradition accepted the reality of human nature. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the Buddhist tradition attributed nothing supernatural to human nature other than its physical and mental faculties.<sup>790</sup> However, it did recognize that the human sense organs were susceptible to stimulus. The stimuli were feelings of craving, hatred and ignorance.<sup>791</sup> These feelings stimulated passions like fuel rouses the fire. When a person with such feelings was driven to act, he/she not only suffered misery himself/herself but caused others to suffer too. The reason was that passion made actions unjust otherwise called the *akusala kamma*. In this way sufferings were effects of unjust actions. These effects were of several kinds, namely, direct or indirect and immediate or delayed.<sup>792</sup>

These passions according to the Buddha's analysis fall under three groups. First: that which refers to all degrees of craving or attachment such as lust, infatuation and greed (*lobha*). Second: that which refers to all degrees of antipathy – hatred, anger, vexation or repugnance (*dosa*). Third: that which refers to all degrees of ignorance – delusion, dullness and stupidity (*moha* or *avidya*). The first and second fires relate to the emotions and over the whole scale of one's attitudes and feelings towards other beings, while the third fire relates to all ideas that are in any way removed from the truth.<sup>793</sup>

Having said this, Dr. Ambedkar underscored Buddha's advice of detachment from the fetters of passion as fundamental, the reason being that these fetters brought misery to a person. This advice is reinforced by the doctrine of *anicca*. Admittedly the world was *anicca* or transient. There were continuous changes in the world

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<sup>789</sup> At the same time the implication of Dhamma cannot be fully realized in the absence of *Prajna* and *Karuna* i.e. understanding and compassion. Admittedly both are relevant in social context and also to protect *selfhood* of every person. A very interesting result of this discussion is the noticeable shift in Dr. Ambedkar's characterization of religion. Previously he had attributed social character to it. This he now credited this to *Dhamma*. Keeping in view that this shift occurred after 1951 and did not govern his earlier thinking when he wrote almost all his articles, we, with the exception of Buddhism, could not make use of it in our study. Cf. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 316.

<sup>790</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 230

<sup>791</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 234

<sup>792</sup> Dr. Ambedkar sought to explain the time lag that may occur between a cause and its effect. Of this Dr. Ambedkar pointed to the four types of effects. These are 1. Immediately-felt-effect or *ditta dhamma vedariya kamma*; 2. Remotely-felt-effect or *upapajja vedaniya kamma*; 3. Indefinitely-felt-effect or *aporapariya vedaniya kamma* and 4. Non-effectives or *ahosi kamma*. Despite these effect-categories Dr. Ambedkar points out that *kamma* or action may directly affect a doer or may affect another instead. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol.11. Mumbai: 1992, p. 244.

<sup>793</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 236.



where everything became something else then turned into nothing.<sup>794</sup> This nothingness is called *sunyata*.<sup>795</sup> Keeping in view that human beings are always becoming, always changing and always growing, it was sensible for them to be detached from the craving to possess property and friends.<sup>796</sup> Therefore, the way for a person to be liberated from misery was by overcoming passions which tie us to this impermanent world. A person free from craving is also free from ego and is freed from the meaningless cycle of rebirth. This was what *nibbana* meant.<sup>797</sup> It did not mean blowing out of life but blowing out feelings that unduly stimulated the passion of our senses.<sup>798</sup> It was a state of *dhamma* or righteousness or justice.<sup>799</sup>

Despite the impermanence of life Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged the permanence of a universal moral order. This was evident in the law of nature for instance in the movements of stellar constellations and the sequel of seasons.<sup>800</sup> There was an order of rhythm and predictability in nature. Similarly there was order in human society.<sup>801</sup> This order was moral i.e. it was a just or a righteous order. Human beings in as much as they needed to be detached from this impermanent world, needed to fall in line with the moral order. In other words they needed to walk in the path of *dhamma* or justice. A person who was enlightened and free of the cravings for the transient world, who turned to *dhamma* or justice, thus became a moral being. Now the deeds of a moral being would be *kusala kamma* or righteous action. Therefore, none except human beings in their *kusala kamma* were responsible for a moral order and conversely by their *akusala kamma* or immoral deeds, for its disorder. Accordingly Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that misery was not divine punishment but a result of the immoral actions of human beings. This is how the Buddhist doctrine of *Kamma Niyam* or the discipline-of-action was explained by Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>802</sup>

From the Judaeo-Christian and for that matter from Islamic and secular perspectives, there are drawbacks in Dr. Ambedkar's concept of *dhamma*. He failed to see that by making human beings alone responsible for all events, a victim was liable to be blamed for his/her sufferings. All this is understandable but what may surprise a reader is his conclusion that the *kamma* of human beings had nothing to do

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<sup>794</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 241.

<sup>795</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 241.

<sup>796</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp. 240-241.

<sup>797</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 237.

<sup>798</sup> Ultimately full release comes with complete extinction of passions when the body disintegrates, which in Buddhist terms in the Pali language is called *Parinibbana*. This, Dr. Ambedkar cautions, is different from *Nibbana*. It means adequate control over passions to enable a person to undertake righteous *kamma*. In this way there can be no *dhamma* without *kamma*.

<sup>799</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 238.

<sup>800</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 242.

<sup>801</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 242.

<sup>802</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 243.

with the sufferings of individuals; rather it was about social moral order in general. He wrote,

The Law of Kamma had to do only with the question of general moral order; it has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual. It is concerned with the maintenance of the moral law of the universe. It is because of this that the law of *Kamma* is a part of *Dhamma*.<sup>803</sup>

If this was the case then there seems to be no clear answer to the question, what does an individual's fortune or misfortune mean? Let us take an example of a car-crash on a motor way. This may have occurred due to the rash driving, which is *akusala kamma* of the driver. But how should we view the suffering of the wounded travellers in this accident? Or a bystander who was coincidentally hit? Dr. Ambedkar in his exposition the *Kamma Niyam* failed to explain the sufferings of those who are not at fault. Whatever may be the critique from the Judaeo-Christian perspective, the fact is that Dr. Ambedkar accepted the tenets of this doctrine as axiomatic.

What comes out in our discussion here is that in Dr. Ambedkar's view *dhamma* requires that one must maintain a moral life of purity and justice, keep passions under control for righteous life, be detached from the impermanent world and believe in the morally just universal order. The *dhamma* of Buddha in Dr. Ambedkar's view was not merely being righteous in life, but it also becoming perfect in life. This meant not only living a pure or righteous life but helping others to live it too. A person who did this was perfect in life.<sup>804</sup>

## 6.2 What is Adhamma ?

Dr. Ambedkar used this term in a distinctive way. Therefore, one should be cautious not to confuse the term *adhamma* with immoral activities; rather it denoted that which did not constitute the *dhamma*. On these subjects it was best to maintain silence. Dr. Ambedkar listed eight beliefs which from the view of the *samkhaya* system were rationally flawed and that there was nothing righteous about them.<sup>805</sup> For clarity we can list them below.

1. The belief in the supernatural e.g. God.
2. The belief in a deity.
3. The belief in *brahman* and *atman*.
4. Belief in soul.
5. Belief in the animal sacrifices.
6. Belief in doctrines based on speculation.
7. Reading of the scriptures.

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<sup>803</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), , p. 245.

<sup>804</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 232.

<sup>805</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp. 249-286.

## 8. Belief in the infallibility of the scriptures

Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that these religious tenets that had contributed nothing to enhance social justice, in Buddha's view, were futile imaginings. These articles did not constitute the *dhamma*. He held that belief in the supernatural, like the idea of soul, nourished superstitions. Buddha on the other hand, as Dr. Ambedkar pointed out, had called to attention "consciousness" as a significant aspect in human life. Buddha had pointed out that consciousness, not *atman* or soul, covered human knowledge, feelings and actions. On this subject the teaching of Buddha was of great significance to Dr. Ambedkar.

Consciousness is ... the chief thing in mans' life. Consciousness is cognitive, emotional and volitional. Consciousness is cognitive when it gives knowledge, information, as appreciating or apprehending, whether it be appreciation of internal facts or of external things and events. Consciousness is emotional when it exists in certain subjective states, characterised by either pleasurable or painful tones, when emotional consciousness produces feeling. Consciousness in its volitional stage makes a being exert himself for the attainment of some end. Volitional consciousness gives rise to what we call will or activity.<sup>806</sup>

In this way Dr. Ambedkar, within the Buddhist tradition, steered out of the supernatural aspects of religion as much as he could manage. Yet it is difficult to say whether espoused atheism as such as he preferred to remain silent on this subject.

### 6.3 What is Saddhamma

Admittedly society does take appropriate turns under the direction of the human intellect. Therefore, to establish a just society it was important to harness human mind in the direction of reason and truth. As Dr. Ambedkar points out *Saddhamma* aimed precisely to do this. So the Buddha said,

The mind is the origin of all this; the mind is the master, the mind is the cause. If in the midst of mind there are evil thoughts, then the words are evil, the deeds are evil, and the sorrow which results from sin follows that man (*sic!* person), as the chariot wheel follows him who draws it. The mind is the origin of all that is; it is the mind that commands, it is the mind that contrives. If in the minds there are good thoughts, then the words are good and the deeds good, and the happiness which results from such conduct follows that man as the shadow accompanies the substance.<sup>807</sup>

*Saddhamma* precisely the *sat* or the true *dhamma*, for Dr. Ambedkar was more advanced than *dhamma* and so *dhamma* should eventually lead us to it. In line with what he understood as Buddha's teaching, Dr. Ambedkar identified four pillars of

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<sup>806</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 263.

<sup>807</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 282.

*saddhamma* for establishing a just society, namely: *pradhnya* or insight, *sila* or virtue, *karuna* or compassion and *maitri* or friendship. So now let us learn about these values.

### 6.3.1 Insight (Pradhnya)

This should be understood as education in the widest sense where *pradhya* and *vidya* i.e. insight and knowledge,<sup>808</sup> would constitute the two ends of a spectrum, in between would be filled up with learning, literacy, etiquettes, culture and wisdom. One who has all this would be a person of insight. In connection with *pradhya* Dr. Ambedkar's basic point was moral. The point was this, that the end of education was not self-glorification; rather learning was to be useful for the welfare of others.

Herein ... we have a man given to the welfare to many folks, to the happiness to many folk. By him are many folk established in the Ariyan Method, to wit: in what is for a lovely nature, in what is of a profitable nature.<sup>809</sup>

Accordingly in line with the Four Noble Truths i.e. after realizing the futility of sufferings one needed to get liberated from it. Thus *pradhya* was this insight into the four noble truths.<sup>810</sup> It follows from this that *vidya* i.e. education, which was the foundation of *pradhya* needed to be open to all<sup>811</sup> irrespective of gender or caste.<sup>812</sup> As Dr. Ambedkar had understood Buddhism, he brought to the fore the individual and collective role of *pradhya*.

### 6.3.2 Virtue (Sila)

Dr. Ambedkar regarded *sila* as another important aspect of *saddhamma*. He pointed out that education had to include *sila* or virtue in its range.<sup>813</sup> Knowing the political and social advantages of developing an educated society established on moral values, Dr. Ambedkar underscored the importance of education in the Buddha's teaching on virtue. He envisaged the agency of religion to ensure that all people from the early years of their life were acquainted with it. He culled five virtues from the Buddhist tradition which were in form of prohibitions. One way to understand the virtues which underlie the five prohibitions i.e. not to kill, not to steal, not to have illicit sex, not to lie and not to drink, is by reversing them. So these will be five virtues i.e. to protect life, to keep personal belongings, to establish family, to access true information and to honour dignity. This is how Dr. Ambedkar puts forth his point through the Buddha, "Brethren ... the person who has striven for

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<sup>808</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 291.

<sup>809</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 293.

<sup>810</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 293.

<sup>811</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 291.

<sup>812</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 287.

<sup>813</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 295.

his own welfare as well as that of the other, is to be deemed just and good".<sup>814</sup> So it is clear that *sila* is the value-system. It helps a person to discern right from wrong, and to espouse what is right and eschew what is wrong. None were exempted from these.

The reason why the Buddha gave greater importance to Sila than to knowledge is obvious. The use of knowledge depends upon a man's Sila. Apart from Sila, knowledge had no value.<sup>815</sup>

The point is to note the social significance of knowledge here. Without the moral code it cannot be at its best for the alleviation of Dalits.

### 6.3.3 Compassion (Karuna)

The third important emphasis in Buddha's teaching on *sadhamma*, according to Dr. Ambedkar, was compassion. Qualities of insight and virtue without compassion were useless. Compassion for the afflicted and vulnerable and weak people has to be extended by those who are healthy and in good economic condition. The example was set by the Buddha who nursed a mendicant afflicted with a loathsome disease, whom no one was ready to touch. Having done this, he instructed his *Bhikkus* or monks to emulate his example of service to the afflicted. Thus spoke the Buddha,

The purpose of Tathagata in coming into the world is to befriend those poor and helpless and unprotected, to nourish those in bodily affliction, whether they be Samanas or men of any other religion – to help the impoverished, the orphan and the aged, and to persuade others so to do.<sup>816</sup>

Beside the extreme unhygienic condition of the sick mendicant, the fear of being ritually polluted was perhaps the reason why the monks were hesitant to touch him. However, the Buddha by his example as well as by his words taught that compassion as caring-service had to be unconditionally offered to the afflicted people in society. So we see that *karuna* in its practice was thoroughly social.

### 6.3.4 Friendship (Maitri)

Dr. Ambedkar underscored Buddha's teaching on *maitri* or friendship. The Buddha had taught that the crown of compassion was *maitri* or friendship. Not only friendship was to be unconditionally extended to all human beings including one's offenders but it was to be extended to all living beings. The test of friendship was to remain unaggressive even under provocative situation. So the Buddha said,

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<sup>814</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 382.

<sup>815</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 295.

<sup>816</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 297.

In like manner an almsman may be gentle and meek, and mild enough so long as nothing unpleasant is said against him. It is only when unpleasant things are said against him that you can test if he had *Maitri* – fellowship in him.<sup>817</sup>

So *maitri* or friendship is an inner disposition in one commitment to relate with others. So the words of Buddha were, “*Maitri* must flow and flow forever”.<sup>818</sup> The implication of this also was thoroughly social in nature. Dr. Ambedkar elsewhere had pointed this out to be a good basis for democracy too.

What we see above is that insight, virtue, compassion and friendship were the four pillars for establishing a just society. This raises two questions in particular: One, what was to be the feature of this just society? And two, how could it's just nature be justified? Dr. Ambedkar's answer to the first query was to break down barriers between human beings.<sup>819</sup> For this reason the three grounds of social inequality – fixity of occupation, lineage and division of labourers – justified by the *Chaturvarna* were unacceptable to Buddha.<sup>820</sup> The point was that these did not make people virtuous. People became virtuous by associating with virtuous people; similarly people became righteous by associating with righteous friends and equal by associating with friends who respected equality. Thus friendship, not segregation of caste system, was to be the chief feature of a just society.

Dr. Ambedkar's answer to the second query was that equality was justified by being self-evidently moral and universal. In other words equality was tantamount to justice from the very start of the evolution of society.<sup>821</sup> It has remained so through all times till the modern stage of society. In the light of this fact it needed no further justification. Equality resulted in socialization of a diverse people into a cohesive community.

What is important is high ideals and not noble birth. No caste; no inequality; no superiority; no inferiority; all are equal. This is what he stood for'. 'Identify yourself with others. As they, so I. As I so they,' So said the Buddha.<sup>822</sup>

So we see that the ideal of friendship in the *sadhamma* was social in the widest sense. The resulting consequence of friendship was strengthening of community life, which in turn reinforced social equality. Dr. Ambedkar's construction of the Buddhist *dhamma* was shaped by his concern for social justice particularly egalitarianism. His hope was that the neo-Buddhism would succeed to establish a just society by making morality of *dhamma* sacred.

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<sup>817</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 299.

<sup>818</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 298.

<sup>819</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 301.

<sup>820</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp. 304-306.

<sup>821</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 324.

<sup>822</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), pp. 305-306.

At this point we must come to terms with an astonishing turn in Dr. Ambedkar's thinking. We know that he constructed *Navayana* or the neo-Buddhism, based on the Theravada tradition and modeled it after Christianity. We can have no quarrel with that but the disappointment is that he justified it because it needed no visa for India. In other words Buddhism, unlike Christianity, was indigenous. In my view this turn in his thinking was odd. He knew, for example, that Buddhism was not indigenous to Japan, neither was Hinduism to Surinam, nor was Christianity to England, nor was Islam to Turkey. Yet these religions were propagated in these lands for the benefit of the people. This did not strike him. At this point we must underline the inflection in Dr. Ambedkar's mind. Admittedly he had yet not left the Hindu fold and he was in some way attached to it. The impact and pressure of the Hindu thinkers and politicians of those times on him is obvious. Unfortunately, after his conversion, he did not live long enough to write more and so it is impossible to know in what direction he would have changed further his thinking.

## 7 Conclusion

ADMITTEDLY BUDDHA'S TEACHING HAD ATTRACTED DR. AMBEDKAR'S ATTENTION and to this he responded in a unique way. He was not merely contented to be a disciple but to be a disciple-maker of the great master. Not only was he prepared to walk the way of Buddha, but to help his *Mahar* community follow him too. What comes out of our discussion above is the appropriate material that Buddhism provided to Dr. Ambedkar for the liberation of the Dalits. Let us turn our attention to the question we raised at the beginning of this chapter. Did he find that the triplex liberty, equality and fraternity preserved in Buddhism? We have seen that he did find this in the Buddhist tradition. He found equality in the Buddha's teaching against the caste-system; he found the idea of liberty in the democratic functioning of the *sangha* or the monastic communities, and similarly fraternity in the idea of *maitri* or friendship, with all sentient beings.

However, Dr. Ambedkar was disappointed with what he observed in the Buddhist countries, namely apathy of Buddhists towards their religion, the rising popularity of Marxism among the younger generation and a complex religious system beyond the reach of ordinary people. Obviously the forms of Buddhism in these countries were not very conducive to facilitate the depressed classes to reclaim their *selfhood*. However, the neo-Buddhism that he embraced with his followers clearly had this on its agenda. This is what Dr. Ambedkar said in his conversion speech, 'We are fighting for honour and self-respect. We are getting ready to take the human being towards perfection for that we are ready for any sacrifice.' The fundamental point here is to note that for Dr. Ambedkar repossession of *selfhood* would mean two things: to act and to become. To become self-respecting people in society involved active engagement to combat inequality. However, the religion in

Buddhist countries—Myanmar, Bhutan, Tibet and Sri Lanka—did not provide adequate fire to fuel this inspiration of Dalits to fight to reclaim their *selfhood*.

Dr. Ambedkar, therefore, had to think of some alternative religion which was indigenous, well developed, rational, moral and just. The question to ask here is this: was he influenced by the idea of the distinction between the indigenous and non-indigenous origins of religions? Did he in the interest of the Dalits wanted them to embrace a religion of Indian origin? An affirmative answer to this is countered by two facts: one, that all through his political life he had refused to compromise on what he thought was good for Dalits; and two, he had been interested in Buddhism much earlier to his promise to Gandhi. Buddhism could not have been an alternative to him to Christianity. If this was so, then Pickett's claim that Dr. Ambedkar twice requested for baptism seems to be an unusual record.<sup>823</sup> We can argue that the versions of Thai, Korean or Japanese Buddhism could be as alien as Christianity and Islam were to India. Therefore, conversion to such versions could also alienate the converts from their culture. The solution for all this was to establish Buddhism altogether on a new line of thinking. Dr. Ambedkar did this by inaugurating the *Navayana* or neo-Buddhism.

He accepted Buddhism within the frame of his specific theory of religion. We have seen that for Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism's significance was both global as well as local for it fulfilled the requirement of *utility* and *justice* which were marks of a good religion. This was obvious in his response to those converted to Buddhism. He challenged them to become the finest disciples of the Buddha so that the whole world could be saved for peace. He wrote,

We must resolve to follow Buddhist religion in the finest way ... if we accomplish this, then we will thrive ourselves, our nation and not only that but the whole world also. Because the Buddhist religion only will be the saviour of the world. Unless there is justice there will be no peace in the world.<sup>824</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar saw a universal significance of Buddhism in its contribution towards world peace or *ahimsa*. In the Indian context Buddhism was relevant in forging a just and moral society. The fact however is that Buddhism had failed to do this. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of reasoning if we hold that where the classical Buddhism had failed, neo-Buddhism would succeed, then in practical terms this means that neo-Buddhism should enable a just society to emerge. In other words this new religion was now to be the model for building a new Indian society. About this, in his conversion speech, he said, 'In all respects this religion is perfect; it has no

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<sup>823</sup> Arthur G. McPhee. *The Road to Delhi: Bishop J. Waskom Pickett Remembered*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>824</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 544.



stigma at all'.<sup>825</sup> That he had relied on Theravada Buddhism is the view of scholars like Hans Kung.<sup>826</sup> He did this perhaps due to Theravada's closeness to the original religion of Buddha. Yet in his view the urgency of the Indian context demanded, not its philosophical but its social operation.

That Dr. Ambedkar regarded the neo-Buddhism best suited for Dalits was evident when he led nearly 300,000 people into its fold on October 14, 1956 at Nagpur.<sup>827</sup> His wife, Dr. Sharda Kabir, a saraswat Brahmin, also converted along with him. This showed that all people irrespective of their social standing were welcome into its fold. The ardent followers of Dr. Ambedkar have honoured him with an affectionate but nearly a divine title of *Babasaheb*. For this reason they not only accepted his canon of *Buddha and His Dhamma* as authoritative but many also regard him as a *Bodhisattva*,<sup>828</sup> a conviction which his adherents have even uploaded onto the websites. Dr. Ambedkar in his lifetime would have none of this. In fact he expressed his abhorrence for hero-worship and supermen. But we are left with some questions at the end. Could neo-Buddhism develop its capacity to forge a just society? Will this new society replace religion's role to address our interior yearnings? Can rationality alone fulfil the need of love? A difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that such questions of human yearnings and sufferings in the former are answered by *anicca* or impermanence, whereas in the latter by *agape* or love. Buddhism aims to break through the human ego and cravings whereas Christianity aims to break through sin and covetousness. These are the cause of human misery. A person who has conquered ego with rationality has cultivated a peaceful mind and emerges as a truly developed *selfhood* full of dignity and confidence. However, we still have to wait and see whether neo-Buddhism will succeed to make India a society of free and equal people.

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<sup>825</sup> B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956), p. 543.

<sup>826</sup> Hans Kung. *Christianity and the World Religions*. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1987, p. 406.

<sup>827</sup> Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar*. p. 501.

<sup>828</sup> John C.B. Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p. 86.

## Chapter Ten

### Righteousness must Transcend Religion

#### 1. Introduction

We have seen how Dr. Ambedkar's experience of religion, especially its practice of the caste system, was bitter yet he did not turn his back on it. Instead when he intellectually engaged with religion, it stimulated him to think and write. He found that religion and society were intricately fused giving rise to dilemmas. For example, if, on the one hand, religion offered solidarity and justice to individuals, then on the other hand it could cause social oppression and inequality. Therefore, in order to forge a just society of free and equal people, he set for himself the task to promote a religion that propounded egalitarianism for the social life of its adherents. Admittedly, this intellectual working out created unavoidable problems for Dr. Ambedkar.

Having said that, it must be admitted that the foregoing work is not another biography; rather it is a study of Dr. Ambedkar's basic ideas and insights on religion and society. That this can help us to reread his biography in a new way is also possible. We have seen that his basic insight was that a religion can only be studied in its social context, and his foundational idea was that society could be reformed only with the help of a good religion i.e. one that propounded egalitarianism. The dilemma here is that he at the end, instead of accepting an egalitarian religion; he inaugurated a new religion of his own making. The detailed expansions of such biographical reflections, however, are beyond the scope of his study.

#### 2. Dr. Ambedkar's Problem

We know that societies are not merely hierarchical or egalitarian, and religions do not offer straightforward solutions for social problems of inequality and discrimination. The fact is that all human societies are a complex whole of a variety of communities, cultures, values and systems. Therefore, all different communities in a society need to share a common agreed set of moral standards which should be accepted as sacred. We can call this as a *shared-moral-standard*. Keeping in view the complex nature of society, one religious system cannot be simply replaced by another, thereby, changing one social order by another. With this in view, we can understand that the problem before Dr. Ambedkar was how to overcome this social diversity to establish an integrated and coherent society which was at the same time just. For this he took help from religion.

### 3. Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Religion and Society

Dr. Ambedkar realized that getting help from religions was not easy. These were not only variegated but also hostile to one another. From among a variety of them, he had to choose one. This had to be a religion that offered social equality as the norm of social order. So Dr. Ambedkar undertook the task of establishing norms to assess all religions. On basis of this a just religion, i.e. the one that propounded an egalitarian social order, could be identified as the most suitable one for society. In this way, he theoretically, attempted to overcome the problem of the socio-religious diversity. Accordingly, he put his understanding of religion to the fore i.e. it's meaning, purpose, function, evolution and types e.g. Judaism, Hinduism and so on. Let us recapitulate Dr. Ambedkar's ideas on this subject which were discussed earlier in our study.

1. A Definition of Religion: It meant the propounding of an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. These basic blueprints for social order could either propound a hierarchical or an egalitarian social order.
2. The Purpose of Religion: It consecrated norms and sanctified a moral order. A social significance of this was that in situations where the law became incapable of controlling the majority, then Religion could succeed to control their collective behavior because of the sacred nature of its norms.
3. The Function of Religion: It made the social order moral, and it preached and propagated that which was good for life. The moral norms which Religion had consecrated for society were *utility*, *justice* and to these he added one more, *reason*. These were deduced from the rituals of primitive, antique and modern stages of society. In this way Dr. Ambedkar showed that the Religion provides a value-system and coherence which are important for the governance of society.
4. The Evolution of Religion: Revolutionary changes occurred in Religion as society evolved. This changed the face of it over a long period of time. These we had condensed as the *Ten-shifts hypothesis*.
5. Types of Religions: There were two types of Religion, namely, *Religion-of-Rules* and *Religion-of-Principles*. The former was mechanical conversely the latter was intellectual and moral. These we had described as two demons who, in spite of living on the same tree i.e. sharing space in the same society, were opposed to each other.

We may recall that the foundations of Religion, in its three progressive stages—primal, antique and modern—were explicitly social i.e. *utility*. These were to

conserve life, to preserve society and to protect individual's interest respectively. We have seen that Dr. Ambedkar's aim was to convert to a Religion that would establish a just society. This entailed a just governance of society, in other words, human life was to be conserved, the community was to be preserved and the individual's interest was to be protected. These three norms which constituted the bedrock of the human society were equally relevant for contemporary society too. This meant that in a society people were to enjoy their civil liberties and were to be treated equally.

Another thing in Dr. Ambedkar's insights is to note that he did not take Religion's complex nature into consideration; instead he took it only to mean a system-of-governance. His theory has no reference to that part of religion that does not pertain to society's system of governance. The exercise that he undertook to draw out the details of the *ten-shifts hypothesis*, was to prepare ground for a morally based idea of governance where all communities in a society would agree that *utility* and *justice* were sanctified by religion. Having reached a moral consensus, the religions would then clear up all such traditional deposits from their repository that contradict these norms. Dr. Ambedkar did all this theoretically as he developed his response to religions. Clearly for him the aim of Religion was social.

We have seen that Dr. Ambedkar regarded *utility* and *justice* as basic norms for judging right and wrong both in society and religion in modern times. Therefore, in his view, a religion that accepted these as normative was a *rational*. We also learnt that for Dr. Ambedkar, justice was a contraction for equality, liberty and fraternity. Unquestionably this was the French Revolutionists' slogan who wanted to be emancipated from the domination of the Monarch and the powerful feudal lords. We know that this event was a result of the scarcity of food, the increasing demand of rising population and the imposition of taxes. To meet the resultant fiscal crisis, King Louis XVI was forced to summon the Estates general at Versailles on May 5, 1789. The King was not in favour that the three orders—the clergy, the nobility and the third estate—should unite as one body. But the third estate forced their will on the King and the three orders, under the leadership of Sieyes Jean Joseph Mounier and Honore Gabirel Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau, declared themselves as the l'Assemblée nationale. They resolved that the taxes should be discontinued at the end of their session. Alarmed with this decision, the King dismissed Jacques Necker, the Finance Minister who was supportive of radical reforms and sent royal troops to Paris. This provoked the citizens of Paris where a large crowd, led by the soldiers, stormed the Bastille Prison. This action of July 14, 1789 has become famous as the French Revolution. After this, the constituent assembly, within a matter of three weeks, introduced three reforms: the Declaration of Rights, the abolition of feudalism and limiting the King's power to veto. The use of the third provision

eventually ended in the abolition of Monarchy – hitherto the source of law and the final court of judicial appeal – paving way for the emergence of a democratic government. It must be admitted that the French Revolution was not opposed to religion as such but to those who supported the monarchy and the feudal system, even if they were Church leaders. Dr. Ambedkar's point was that this slogan of the French revolutionists was rooted in religion. In this case, the Judeo-Christian tradition resonates with biblical literature where God's justice is paired with righteousness e.g. Psalm 72.1-2. It means that justice is not merely equality before the law but it also means God's righteousness, where afflicted people are assisted with a just distribution of resources and care, both under the law and in all other relational aspects within society. Justice in this sense is righteous relationships among people. Let me now map out Dr. Ambedkar's insights on religion with my own comments which we have established in the earlier chapters. We can see a sequence emerging like this:

1. Society is a given fact where human beings are born and where they live till they die. The social nature of human beings and their interdependence to meet their needs make society an unavoidable fact.
2. Society inevitably becomes socially and economically unequal giving rise to classes and castes based on economy, occupation, gender, language, ethnicity and colour. Here some people gain dominance and others are subjugated.
3. This injustice of inequality cause two things: the subjugation of the powerless as well as the lawlessness of the powerful. We may also note that the majority makes law so that they become the masters of the law. This can make them suit their own advantages which may perpetuate inequality oppression, rejection, exploitation and.
4. Religion, which originally in the primal phase started as ritualized actions of socially useful roles for human beings, also changes tracks to support and sanctify unjust social order of its day. Therefore, religion needs to be assessed and reformed. This in turn will help to change the thinking of the people and to facilitate the establishment of social righteousness.
5. The importance of Religion should not be underestimated for two reasons. One that it has the power to let loose or to rein in the behaviour of the majority. This may adversely or favourably affect the minorities of a society; and two, that it gives a blueprint for structuring society, which Dr. Ambedkar called as the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. This is a difficult but crucial point in Dr. Ambedkar's thinking on religion, because the two things – inspiration, as well as, the practical extension of its ideals in law – have to be held together. For the State, the issue of religious plurality in society adds to this problem of differentiation by giving rise to multiple collectivities in one

society i.e. communitarianism. Understandably if a society were to be established on Dr. Ambedkar's ideals, it would not tolerate alternative religions which may differ in their ideals.

6. A religion's blue print for the social order should be assessed on the standard of reason and human rights. The reason being that the law does not affect the human heart and conscience, e.g. it is the human heart, not the law, which obliges us to share our goods with the poor. Having assessed various religions, Dr. Ambedkar found that it was very difficult to reform them. Here a way out was to establish a single religious system based on entirely his ideals.
7. In order to undertake the exercise of assessing a religion, Dr. Ambedkar unveiled the foundational roots of Religion's advancement over several millennia. These, as we have discussed earlier, were three, namely, conserving life, preserving society and protecting the individual. He reduced these to *utility* and *justice* that constituted the basis of religion to govern society.
8. A religion that sanctified *utility* and *justice*, instead of regarding the supernatural, as normative was *rational*. Such a religion would resist propagating superstitions. However, from what Bishop Waskom Pickett had noted, Dr. Ambedkar at times doubted his atheism.
9. A Religion, therefore, that sanctifies what is *useful*, *just* and *rational*, offers a righteous blueprint for a social order and for regulating behaviour of the people. It does this by making morality, instead of the law, sacred. Hence, a religion that can stand this test should be established in a society. Here Dr. Ambedkar misses the big point of religious pluralism in society. Understandably so, because as a statesman with an agenda for the emancipation of Dalits, he saw difficulties in uniting and organizing them on democratic principles of freedom and equality, if they were divided in their religious loyalties.
10. A society established on religion's intention to make people free and equal would constitute a just society. This aspect of the *utility* of religion for society was tantamount to justice and righteousness. The former involved equal treatment of all people under the law and the latter involved solidarity, reciprocal responsibility and mutual care among people in a society. From this aspect of justice and righteousness Dr. Ambedkar had figured out, as we have discussed earlier, that the slogan of the French Revolutionists—liberty, equality and fraternity—in the end had religious roots.
11. It is essential that a State be established to make laws for society and execute them or to punish those who break them. Therefore, it is the responsibility of

the State to ensure that the people not only live peaceably in society, but also that the interests of individuals are protected. In this way the State comes mid-way of seeing society as a closed house, on the one hand and on the other, the individuals as free beings. Here we should highlight Dr. Ambedkar's insight that the rules of society are authorized by religion.

12. However, all societies become unjust and differentiate into unequal factions and so do religions especially when they sanctify unjust norms and worldviews. Therefore, there arises a need to assess and reassess our religion. When this assessment succeeds to re-establish a righteous religion, then the above cycle would repeat itself.

From what we have recalled above, Dr. Ambedkar believed that religion had the authority to sanctify, e.g. it had earlier sanctified the *dharma*, the *dhamma* and the gospel. This demonstrated the fact that by doing this it makes a philosophy or an ideology or a theology sacred. Once sanctified, the social order, moral order and the worldview propounded by that particular philosophy or ideology or theology becomes sacred. Having reached this point, a religion propounds what it has accepted as sacred in an indisputable fashion. The drawback *here* is that it can advocate social inequality as a sacred order; e.g. the caste system is a case in point. To counter this, every religion, in Dr. Ambedkar's view, needed to be tested on the anvil of justice. But as we have already pointed out, that this method was too simple to analyze the complexity of religion.

A review of this method of assessment brings three drawbacks to the fore. The first is that Dr. Ambedkar's approach to the religious traditions was reductionist. His idea of *an-ideal-scheme* would theoretically promote only one religion which fulfilled these ideals. The second drawback is the inherent contradiction in his argument. As all religions propound a *scheme-of-governance*, they need a society, but we know that societies in their nature are inevitably diverse. It is not possible to have a homogeneous society with a single religion. We will take this up in our discussion later. Third drawback *was* that he emphasized the social role of religion at the expense of its transcendental dimension.

#### **4. Dr. Ambedkar's Response to Indian Religions**

Keeping in view the above insights, let us recapitulate Dr. Ambedkar's assessment of various religious traditions. To understand Dr. Ambedkar's response to them in India we must grasp his way of classifying them. To be precise these were two; the class of religions that could be grouped under the *Religion-of-Rules* and others under the *Religion-of-Principles*. He had pointed out that The Rules were practical but mechanical; on the other hand, The Principles were intellectual requiring people to use their reasoning power to judge between the good and the

evil. Therefore through this exercise he hoped that righteousness in society and state would be established. With this classification in view he assessed various religious traditions in a mitigated way by taking their social usefulness into account and ignoring the transcendental aspects. Let me recall Dr. Ambedkar's assessment with my comments below.

1. Primal Religions: It was obsessively ritualistic either to sterilize or to insulate or to ward off the visible or the invisible powers that threatened life. These were Religions-of-Rules, albeit, in a primitive way. In as much as the Primal Religions were useful to study the nature of primitive society, these were incapable to help the people move into modernity.
2. The Hindus: The Hindus had the drawback of the caste system which created social stratification. This was propounded in the *dharma* which had made it to be a Religion-of-Rules. Consequently, people suffered the consequences of inequality. It caused isolation, discrimination and oppression..
3. The Muslims: Despite their religious ideal of egalitarianism they did not treat their Dalit coreligionists with equality and friendship. For example as he found in Bengal their community was vertically divided as *ashraf*, *ajlaf* and *arzal*. These sections corresponded to the caste system allowing limited intermixing among them. The Islamic tradition, under the tradition of *Sharia* or the religious law, on the one hand, and the caste system on the other, was a Religion-of-Rules. Consequently they suffered social stagnation.
4. The Christians: Free from the tradition of religious legalism, Christianity was a Religion-of-Principles. However, despite its ideals of equality, freedom and fellowship the Indian Christians needed respite from the brutality of casteist practices within their community. Moreover it was politically weak and numerically insignificant in India.
5. The Sikhs: Although Sikhism was a Religion-of-Principles the Sikhs were affected by the caste system. For instance the status of the *Ramdasi* communities, who were faithful Sikhs but were classified as Scheduled Caste, was a glaring example of unequal social distinctions among them.
6. The Jews: They were an interesting and an ancient community in India. Despite being a Religion-of-Rules it had adapted itself to modern society. Although Dr. Ambedkar was interested in the Jewish scriptures to establish some aspects of his theory of religion, it was not a religion to which he had ever contemplated to approach.



7. The Buddhists: There are various types of Buddhists in the world. Dr. Ambedkar found these forms were irrelevant for Dalits. As if instinctively driven, as his life drew to an end due to persistent ill-health, he decided to convert to what he had created after his own ideals. This was a diminished form of the Buddhist religion. He had called it the *Navyana* or the neo-Buddhism where *Dhamma* of justice and fraternity were sanctified as norms for a righteous society. In this way he founded a Religion-of-Principles.

Although Dr. Ambedkar from his own insights appraised various religious traditions, he mostly left these exercises undeveloped. Except for Hinduism and Buddhism we do not find fully developed assessments of the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of other religious traditions. So the application of his methodology to assess religious traditions is open for further research. Having discussed some significant contradictions in Dr. Ambedkar's theory of religion in the previous section above let us elaborate some of its distinctive features below.

## 5. Dr. Ambedkar's Reductionism

The two formulations with which Dr. Ambedkar reduced religion into a social operation are these: one was to define religion as an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*, and the other was to concentrate on two norms—*utility* and *justice*—as the scale to assess the whole universe of religions. We can call these as "Dr. Ambedkar's Reductionist Apparatus". As a result of this, his theory ended up in contradictions and his decisions were inconsistent with for what he had stood. In this section we will discuss features of Dr. Ambedkar's reductionism.

**5.1 Diminution of Religion:** All religions are diversified and unwieldy. The reason is that they have a comprehensive worldview consisting of beliefs, rituals, laws, morality, myths, theologies, mysticisms, philosophies, scriptures, traditions and histories. All these parts give shape to its universe. These components do not offer a coherent theory as such; instead they are insights into human life. They, therefore, break down any idea of a one-system governance of society. Dr. Ambedkar, however, took a different approach with regard to religion. With a commitment to social reform he really thought that religions could be unjust. That he had reasons to take this approach is well known. In as much as he was right in pinpointing the relevance of religion in determining social behaviour, he was wrong in pinning down the role of religion on the single track of organizing social governance. This diminutive approach of Dr. Ambedkar theoretically looks lucid but it hindered him to come to terms with the complex makeup of religion which failed to fit into his norms of *utility*, *justice* or *reason*. In his line of thinking, therefore, much of religion that fell beyond the scope of his norms would have to be eliminated from

the scheme of study e.g. transcendence. However, we must at once admit that there were times when Dr. Ambedkar doubted his own atheism.

The drawback with his approach is that such reduced ideas do not constitute a proper religion. Clearly, his theoretical impositions on religions, though designed for social reform, are unrealistic as it is impossible to eliminate the paradoxes that emerge from the inherent diversified nature of religion. But he was so convinced of the social utility of religion that he disregarded both, its diversity of scope, as well as, its plurality in a society. Now if his reductionist apparatus of assessing religions were to destroy its diversified nature, and thereby Religion itself, then it would bring an end to society also. In the absence of society the operation of Religion, by his definition, would become irrelevant. In other words, the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of a religion has no operational scope if society vanished and its population broke up into minute unrelated floating units.

**5.2 Communitarian Religion:** We have seen that Dr. Ambedkar as a theorist of religion and state needed society to establish an adherence to his form of religion. Therefore, he had to win the heart of the Hindus, but he could neither win them over from *Manu*, nor could he wean them away from the *Bhakti* tradition. We know that Dr. Ambedkar was a statesman and a nationalist of his times and so he looked for an indigenous alternative. Although the solution for his problem came from the Buddhist tradition, he rejected their conventionally established communities. Instead he inaugurated a new Buddhist community in India of which he became the first member, and many followed him immediately on the spot by converting to his new form of religious expression—*Navayana* or neo-Buddhism. In this way he succeeded in establishing his new religion in the new community. We have earlier studied the mitigated nature of his approach to religion i.e. his reductionist apparatus. Here, the newly inaugurated Buddhist community and the neo-Buddhist religion, is an example of this. This community was not intended to be differentiated into diverse schools of thought and types of practice. But then a community with one religion, one worldview, one founder and one value system would it not end up becoming communalistic? Ideally it may not look disjointed but it needs little evidence to realize that in such a homogeneous community those who differ would be marginalized and so the answer would be “yes”.

Admittedly, what is true at the level of community tends to be true at the wider level of society. We know that inequality, exclusion and hatred flares up when a community feels marginalized from the mainstream of society. Any form of communalism fragments the larger society. Keeping in view the fact that the wider society is made up of multiple communities, such fragmentation does not help to integrate society. This brings us back to where we had started, namely, the situation of social exclusion, inequality and the problem of injustice. The danger here is that

this would not be different from what communalism in India involves which we had discussed earlier in section-4 of chapter one of this study. Conversely, in my view every community at the local level should welcome diversity of views and practices within itself. This will help the communities to appreciate diversity at the wider social level also. However, it must be noted that if diversity can avert the imposition of the dominant community's worldview on society, it can also create communalism which can flare up communal hatred and the balkanization of that region e.g. as erstwhile Yugoslavia.

**5.3 Inconsistent Approach to Religion:** One may say that a practical solution to the problem of diversity of religions in society would be to have a civil religion for its members. In the Indian context the obvious choice would be the religion of the majority i.e. Hinduism; but this was deeply problematic for Dr. Ambedkar. His first problem was that he had assessed that Hindu society was unequal due to the caste system and the second problem was that he had publicly declared his intention of converting to an egalitarian religion. After having converted to an egalitarian religion, he could then offer it to people as an alternative to the caste system. We studied his argument earlier that with the removal of caste system there would be no Hinduism left. But if this were to happen, it would cause social chaos. In other words, the absence of society could create a vacuum for the communities and their subgroups might collide. But anarchy was not what Dr. Ambedkar had wanted. For him the need to preserve society, in order to establish an egalitarian religion, was essential.

We have already pointed out that Dr. Ambedkar could neither win over the Hindus, who had articulate exponents, nor could he ignore them because they formed the social majority. At the same time he, as a nationalist, also had to relate himself to the nationalistic feelings of the people of those times, who had spurned many things of foreign import. One way to address this predicament of leaving the Hindu fold was to adopt an indigenous religion. In this way he could do what he had publicly announced i.e. renounce Hinduism, yet he could be nationalistic by not adopting a foreign religion. As none of the existing indigenous religions could satisfy him, he propounded a new form of Buddhism, namely The *Navayana*. Having reached this decision, Dr. Ambedkar abandoned his search for an egalitarian religion. But this was inconsistent with his vision i.e. to establish a just society with the help of an egalitarian religion. This inconsistency was the result of his reductionism.

**5.4 Partial Engagement with Religions:** We may recall that Dr. Ambedkar took a great interest in observing, documenting and analyzing the belief-systems, scriptures and practices of several religions. In this exercise he assessed whether

religions had succeeded in ordering society on the ideals of freedom, egalitarianism and kinship. In almost all the cases, he pointed out that the Indian religions had, in this respect, miserably failed. Having said that, we should also bring to the fore the fact that Dr. Ambedkar neither assessed the best of the classical ideals of various religions vis-à-vis his norms, nor did he assess the practice of religions vis-à-vis their classical ideals. Here are two examples of this—Hinduism and Buddhism. With Hinduism he was deeply familiar and so he went at length to show that its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* was basically inequality of the caste system. But he studied Buddhism with a similar depth to establish exactly the opposite point. Here we see that with the former he did not but with the latter he did engage with the best of its tradition. However, in both these cases he partially engaged with religion.

Dr. Ambedkar's reductionist approach to religion like some well known western thinkers—Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72), Karl Marx (1818-83) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)—was partial, unorthodox and to a degree anti-institutional. This approach portrayed the leaders—priestly classes and dominant castes—as powerful, irresponsible and selfish who manipulated people to their own advantage. But this portrayal fails to appreciate the beliefs and sources of inspirations of Dalits. Looking at the picture from the opposite end one can accuse the reductionists too of manipulating people instead of inspiring them. But Dr. Ambedkar was so convinced by his own line of thinking that he could not see the potentials of dialogue with Hindus and Muslims. This failure shows how he had underestimated the power of realizing the common humanness of all people, including Tribal and Dalits, whose beliefs and inspirations were of no consequence to him. This lapse in his thinking caused by the application of his reductionist apparatus explains his various perplexing decisions and indecisions; for example, his engagement with the Hindu leaders to discuss his conversion is puzzling particularly in the light of his declared intention to abandon the Hindu fold. Similarly, his delayed decision to convert to an indigenous religion rather than choosing an egalitarian one is perplexing too. Furthermore, a contradiction is obvious in the way he had applied his reductionist apparatus. Despite settling down in favour of an indigenous religion over and against those of the foreign origins, he did not abandon his apparatus to assess religions which was based on—equality, liberty and fraternity—a triad that had emerged from within the Christian culture of Europe.

## 6. Applications for India

Having studied Dr. Ambedkar's views in religions and the problems embedded in them, we should seek some applications of our study for India. But before we do this let us try to understand why he fell in this trap of contradiction. The reason is that his question—"What is a good religion?"—was wrong. I think that the exercise to disprove the worth of a religion fails to convince people to abandon

their religion in order to embrace another. Moreover, in Indian society, the big problem has been to ensure social cohesion and national integration in the face of religious diversity. This also has been an on-going struggle in India where the Indian State seeks to actualize the multiple provisions of the Indian Constitution i.e. to establish a system of governance for the good of all *vis-à-vis* to grant full liberty to individuals. Although in a multi-religious society achieving this looks like drawing square-circle, it shows that for wholesome life for all people our social context demands intelligent insights to manage religious complexity. This also shows that the question that Dr. Ambedkar should have asked is this—how we can agree on a shared-moral-standard for all people in a multi-religious society?

### **6.1 A Shared-Moral-Standard for National Integration**

This question of shared-moral-standard is important for a State because it is responsible for maintaining the social integration of the nation. To achieve this in a pluralistic society, people of all religions or ideologies need to agree on a common standard of morality. The State, however, can neither guarantee social consent, nor social cohesion nor a shared-moral-standard. However, it is possible that people, despite their differing worldviews, could agree to undertake these exercises. Once the consensus of shared morality is reached, religions can guarantee adherence to this standard because they have people's loyalty. But Dr. Ambedkar did not seek this; instead he wished to establish a just society through a religion that propounded egalitarianism.

Having said this, it must be confessed that it is not easy to dismantle an established religion in a society. In the Indian society Hinduism, the religion of the vast majority, has significantly increased since the partition and independence of India. Therefore, even in his own times, Dr. Ambedkar had to make attempts to reform Hinduism first. We have discussed earlier, in section 3.1 of chapter two of our study that he tried to do this through the Hindu Code Bill, which was defeated in the Indian Parliament. Having little confidence in Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the Indian Republic and no conviction in dialogue, he finally left both, the Indian Parliament and the Hindu fold. A way to understand his action is in the light of his reductionist approach to religion and society.

It must also be noted that a State, in the interest of national integration, has to relate its system-of-governance with communities of multiple-conviction. It tries to do this by attempting to balance the common good (utility) with the rights of individuals (justice). But in this attempt it is not always consistent. In other words, the options for common utility may not always coincide with the interest of individuals. Dr. Ambedkar was not conscious of this inconsistency in his theory. A solution to address this inconsistency we have already discussed above i.e. to develop a shared-moral-standard to which all people in a society could agree. This

then has to be the shared public space which will include the protection of the civil liberties of people in the face of what is collectively useful for society. Having said this we should recognize that individual liberty to choose can best be ensured in a community of equals that allows freedom, which is democracy.

### **6.2 Inter-religious Dialogue for establishing a shared space**

The significance of inter-religious dialogue can be appreciated in the light of the weakness of Dr. Ambedkar's reductionist approach to religion. This does not, to use Pascal's famous phrase, explain 'the reasons of the heart' that inspire people and help them to develop into citizens. We have also discussed the significance of the shared-moral-standard in society, which is a common space acceptable to all citizens. This will balance extreme polarities between those who are socially suppressed and those who dominate. In my view this can best be achieved by inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue is not a conversation between two parties; rather it should be envisaged as a conference of religions and ideologies where all dissimilar voices—diverse and contradictory—can be heard. This demands humility to learn from others, a deep respect for the convictions of others, sensitivity for the feelings of others, a desire to engage with the best-of-traditions of others, confidence in one's own faith tradition and politeness in expressing differences. Here it is possible to reach a moral standard for all and from there to develop a value-system acceptable to each religious or ideological group. Such a moral standard can function as a civil morality i.e. as the heart and conscience of the society.

Therefore, inter-religious dialogue should not be reduced to sessions of learned conversations of specialists of religion in some secure environment; rather it should be in the public space. We may recall that Dr. Ambedkar criticized the idea of relegating religion into a personal affair. In this matter he was correct. Inter-religious dialogue could take various forms of open sharing of views on a range of social issues, like conventions or seminars. It could be through writing in the newspaper columns, books and publications and even in ordinary conversations with people.

### **6.3 Active-Reconciliation for Restoring the *Selfhood* of Dalits**

We have in various parts of our study pointed out how the *selfhood* of a broken person is adversely affected by a repressive system of governance especially when it is propounded by religion. This results in estrangement among people and communities. The way to restore the *selfhood* of Dalits according to Dr. Ambedkar was to politically empower them. We see in the Indian context that different communities and castes co-exist with mutual disinterest. Even if the laws have made life easier for the Dalits, it has not created for them a social intercourse with the other communities. Here there is a need for reconciliation between those who have been wronged with those who have wronged others. But these initiatives of active-

reconciliation should not be confused with making compromises. It will be this mutual acceptance that will restore the *selfhood* of those who have been wronged. *Selfhood* is a positive emotional state of a person. It is evident at the level of personal confidence as well as in the self esteem of a person. This will also be visible in one's mental and physical wellbeing which in turn assures a person to flourish in life. Conversely a stunted *selfhood* results when a person suffers three setbacks, namely, being discredited, devalued and dispossessed. In other words when a person is humiliated, the credits in his/her self-worth gets subtracted. Similarly, when a person is underestimated of his/her capabilities then he/she may experience reduction in the way he/she had valued him/herself. But worse is when a person is deprived of the award or the appreciation when it is deserved or when he/she is deprived of the money or property or dignity or status where it is due. The regaining and repossession of *selfhood* occurs when this is reversed. When what Dalits have been dispossessed of, is duly restored to them they regain their confidence and sense of worth. In other words, this means restoring freedom to Dalits to have access like others to all prospects—education, careers, marriage and religion—that are available in the wider society. This is justice. It was for this that Dr. Ambedkar not only took a firm stand in the Round Table Conference to win separate electorate for the Dalits but he also advocated their conversion to a just religion. At another level implementing justice will break the old social arrangements of dependence of the subservient people on the dominant sections of society. This breaking up will have to be immediately covered up with a new social arrangement of interdependence among equals.

The point is that justice does not automatically create social integration. In this line of reasoning one can see the drawback of incorporating Dalits into a new religion, which has not been assimilated into a mainstream religion, especially neo-Buddhism which was designed on Dr. Ambedkar's reductionist theory. It can socially quarantine its adherents. Nonetheless, action for reconciliation must be undertaken to make the different communities of a society to meet together. Here the emphasis should be to appreciate and celebrate the common humanity of all people in spite of their region-cultural differences. Here a shared-moral-standard of a society can be of help so that justice can be accompanied with reconciliation. It will help the healing of the interior wounds which is an important aspect of restoring a broken person's *selfhood*. Establishing peace, extending forgiveness, developing harmonious feelings and initiating reconciliation are aspects of righteousness that enhances confidence and assures dignity to a broken victim of the caste-system. This helps the victim to fearlessly encounter the obstinacy of oppressor with serene confidence and peaceful intelligence.

## 7. Epilogue

DR. AMBEDKAR'S INSISTENCE TO TEST FAITH ON THE ANVIL OF JUSTICE IS VALID in spite of the imperfections in his arguments to which we have drawn our attention in this study. Although Dr. Ambedkar's Reductionist Apparatus is most interesting, its utility has a limited scope to specifically deal with the issues of justice within a religious tradition. At the same time it must be admitted that though many had suffered the excesses of the caste system, few in India had responded to it in the way Dr. Ambedkar did. Few had reached the level of thinking that he had reached in his times. He fiercely encountered the most powerful and influential personalities on the Indian political scene of his time and met them with ideological counterpoints. To those who propagated freedom as a suitable slogan to address the contingency of the time, Dr. Ambedkar spoke to them of equality; to those who were mesmerized by Gandhian values of truth and non-violence, he reminded them of justice and kinship; to those intellectuals who had idolized the Hindu culture, he justified converting to another religion; to those whose imagination was swayed by the novel idea of Pakistan, he spoke of democratically unified society; to those politicians who demanded a religious-State, he spoke of a secular-State; to those who related theocracy to politics, he reminded them that democracy was rooted in religion. He stood diametrically opposed to those who wanted the State to patronize their religion; conversely he held that religion preserve a State. It was not religion but society which was under its threat! Therefore, it was the society, not the religion that needed the protection of the State. His conviction that righteousness will prevail over religion and that a just society can be established is compelling.

Whether we agree or not, we learn from him that our faith in what our religions teach us should help us to establish society of equal and free people, in other words a just society. If our religion fails to teach this to us then we must search for an alternative. His aim was to use every bit of religion to promote righteousness and good quality of life. The importance of this is obvious in our times when the revival of an Indian identity is not based on righteousness but on culture. Culture's proximity to religion has sacralized it to such an extent that its practices and norms are accepted unquestioningly. In these times Dr. Ambedkar's message comes out clearly in favour of righteousness not culture. There is neither anything permanent about culture that demands our conformity nor sacred that needs to be guarded. Culture changes our society in as much as the society changes our culture. But change in a desirable direction can be possible if people respected the shared-moral-standard—equality, solidarity, peace, honesty, mutual care and dignity—to which all diverse communities of society could agree. We learn from Dr. Ambedkar that truth may affirm facts and figures but without righteousness it is impossible to



address social disparity. On these convictions he had conscientiously worked for establishing modern republic of India.

Ironically, the one who along with Mahatma Gandhi had founded modern India was accorded no State ceremonies at his last rites. Although the *ashokchakra* or the blue wheel at the centre of the Indian national flag was added at his insistence, his body was not wrapped in it. Neither was he honoured with the twenty-one gun salute nor the sounding of the Last Post at his funeral. Yet millions of people have come to honour him every year since 1956 at *Chaityabhoomi* in Mumbai. This shows that Dalits will remember him and will continue to draw inspiration from him. No one has been able to fit his great personality, which towers over time and history, into any category. He is regarded as second to none by the millions who admire him. The fact that the most popular activity, presently in India, is to construct Dr. Ambedkar's statues, confirms that his icon has kept alive the hope of the disadvantaged people to forge a casteless and just society. He will not be forgotten for generations to come and his writings will stimulate intellectual discourse and discussions on religion, society and state from the perspective of justice.

## **Op het aambeeld van rechtvaardigheid: Ambedkars waardering van de religies in India**

(Nederlandse samenvatting)

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was de belangrijkste medestander van Mahatma Gandhi in het overleg over de zelfstandigheid van India voor de Tweede Wereldoorlog; hij leidde het opstellen van de grondwet die bij de zelfstandigheid in 1947 in werking trad. Hij was ontdaan over het gedrag van zijn mede hindoe gelovigen ten opzichte van de onaanraakbaren, zoals hij dat uit eigen ervaring kende. Hij wilde weten wat de diepere achtergrond van de onzuiverheid en de daaruit voortvloeiende onaanraakbaarheid en 'apartheid' was. Waarom werden ze door de 'reine kasten' als minderwaardig werden beschouwd, als mensen met wie men niet mag omgaan? Ambedkar was ervan overtuigd dat de segregatie kon worden opgeheven door het gedrag van mensen te veranderen. Hun gedrag kon worden veranderd door de hervorming van hun ideeën, zo meende hij. Het kernprobleem lag daarom in de religie. Omdat die doorslaggevend is voor hoe mensen over de samenleving denken, wilde Ambedkar zich een eigen oordeel over de diverse religies vormen. In zijn (omvangrijke) gepubliceerde werken behandelde hij de grote religies uitvoerig. Tegelijk zocht hij naar een religieus tehuis waar de mensen die tot zijn eigen gemeenschap behoorden, een waardig onderdak zouden kunnen vinden.

Om religies te kunnen beoordelen moest hij zich een oordeel vormen over de relatie tussen religie en samenleving. Hij ontwikkelde zijn visie erop vanuit de gedachte dat religie een bepaalde sociale orde legitimeert die ze voorstelt als een *ideaal schema van goddelijk bestuur (ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance)*. Volgens Ambedkar is het eerste doel van religie om de samenleving een blauwdruk voor een bepaalde ordening te verschaffen. Het tweede doel is om die ordening, die de sociale cohesie zouden garanderen, religieus te legitimeren. Vanwege het enorme maatschappelijke belang van religie ging hij na of de verschillende religies wel een rechtvaardige structuur voor de samenleving boden. Onder rechtvaardigheid verstond Ambedkar gelijkheid, vrijheid en broederschap—waarbij hij in tegenstelling tot de Franse Revolutie—gelijkheid voorop stelde en tevens de religieuze achtergrond van de leus benadrukte.

In zijn visie lag de relevantie van religie dus in haar sociale betekenis en haar nut voor de samenleving. Vanuit dit (reductionistische) gezichtspunt wilde hij de waarde van de diverse tradities bepalen. Zijn studie van de Indiase religies beoogde tweeërlei: de wortels van de sociale ongelijkheid blootleggen, en nagaan hoe de specifieke religies de samenleving willen ordenen. Op grond van zijn beschouwing van de geschiedenis van religie en samenleving stelde hij twee normen vast om

religies te beoordelen: *nut* en *rechtvaardigheid*. Hij maakte duidelijk dat de religie in de drie fasen van de evolutie van religie en samenleving – oorspronkelijk, antiek en modern – uiteenlopende doeleinden heeft gediend: bescherming van het leven, bescherming van de samenleving en bescherming van het individu. Deze eerste twee waarden noemde hij *nut* en de laatste *rechtvaardigheid*. Het nut – bescherming van het leven – gedurende de eerste twee fasen was van belang voor de overleving van de menselijke soort, terwijl de bescherming van het individu van belang was om de mens tot een vrij en gelijkwaardig wezen te maken. Dàt is rechtvaardigheid. Deze normen paste Ambedkar toe in zijn evaluatie van het *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* van religies.

De keerzijde van deze religietheorie was dat het goddelijke er geen rol in speelde. In de ogen van Ambedkar was zijn benadering rationeel. Religies die vanuit deze criteria tekort schoten, moesten worden hervormd zodat hun ideale schema voor het besturen van de samenleving rechtvaardig zou worden en nuttig voor het volk: goede religie stimuleert gelijkheid, vrijheid en broederschap. Wanneer eerst de religie is hervormd, wordt ook de herordening van de samenleving mogelijk. Aldus Ambedkars uitgangspunt voor sociale verandering. Andere aspecten van religie zijn esoterisch en metafysisch.

Deze lijn van denken is zowel interessant als problematisch. Een van de problemen ligt in het dilemma van *nut* en *rechtvaardigheid*. Er zijn immers situaties waarin het collectieve belang van de samenleving niet overeenkomt met het belang van een individuele persoon, en omgekeerd. Ambedkar heeft deze zwakheid in zijn visie niet goed doordacht. Ook had hij geen verklaring voor de weerstand van gelovigen om – in hun eigen belang – van religie te veranderen. Zelfs een wet die in hun eigen belang was, is in 1951 door het Indiase parlement afgestemd: de Hindu Code. Zijn manier om te proberen deze weerstand te overwinnen, was om zijn ideeën duidelijk op schrift te stellen in de hoop dat de lezers erdoor zouden worden overtuigd om de religie en de samenleving te hervormen.

Maar laten we nu terugkeren naar zijn beoordeling van religies. Zijn werkwijze om een religie te beoordelen was eerst om bloot te leggen hoe ze de sociale werkelijkheid stempelde. Daartoe analyseerde Ambedkar de rituelen en praktijken van de diverse religies – niet hun leerstellingen. Wat was het doel van het ritueel? Het ritueel sacraliseert een sociale ordening. Die ordening kan hiërarchisch zijn of egalitair. Voor Ambedkar bestond rechtvaardigheid uit twee dingen: ten eerste moest de sociale ordening alle mensen vrijheid, gelijkheid en broederschap garanderen; ten tweede moesten ongelijke mensen door de wet niet eenvormig worden behandeld. Dalit zijn achtergesteld en moeten hun achterstand inhalen; daarvoor moeten programma's worden vastgesteld (wat feitelijk voor sommige dalit groepen – Scheduled Castes – is gebeurd). Individuele personen moeten worden

beschermd—in overeenstemming met zijn gedachte dat wat goed is voor een individu ook goed is voor de samenleving. Zo meende hij de spanning tussen nut en rechtvaardigheid te overbruggen. In de religie staat niets voor altijd vast behalve de principes van de bescherming van de samenleving en van het individu.

Op dit punt gekomen, kan ik al drie bevindingen van mijn doordenking van Ambedkars theorie van religie kort weergeven. Ten eerste, dat het conflict van de beide doeleinden van religie een dilemma schept; ten tweede, dat religie aan de ongelijkheid in een samenleving een sterke basis verschaft; ten derde, dat het moeilijk is om de samenleving te veranderen door religie alleen. Voor de beoordeling van religies is nog een andere onderscheiding van Ambedkar van belang. Hij onderscheidde tussen *wetreligies* en *religies van principes of beginselen*. Onderworpen aan regels en wetten handelen mensen zonder nadenken, maar geleid door principes moeten mensen er zelf over nadenken *waarom* en *hoe* ze zullen handelen. Alleen zo nemen mensen verantwoordelijkheid voor hun handelen. Hiermee kunnen we Ambedkars lijn van denken nauwkeuriger weergeven.

Mensen worden geboren en sterven in de samenleving zoals die feitelijk is. Onmiskkenbaar zijn mensen op elkaar aangewezen en zijn ze voor wat ze nodig hebben van elkaar afhankelijk. Maar onvermijdelijk ontstaat er in de loop van de tijd sociale en economische ongelijkheid. Die loopt uit op het ontstaan van klassen en kasten, gebaseerd op economie, beroep, gender, taal, etniciteit en huidskleur. Sommige mensen worden dominant, anderen worden ondergeschikt. Deze onrechtvaardigheid leidt tot de onderwerping van de zwakken en tot wetteloosheid van de sterken. De meerderheid stelt de wet vast en kan de wet gebruiken al naar gelang het haar uitkomt—waardoor ongelijkheid, onderdrukking, verwerping, exploitatie en uitsluiting voortduren.

Zo verandert de religie—die oorspronkelijk begon met rituele handelingen die de sociaal nuttige rollen van personen vastlegden—in een apparaat dat de onrechtvaardige orde van een bepaalde cultuur ondersteunt en heilig verklaart. Daarom moet elke religie worden geëvalueerd en hervormd. Betere religie zal helpen om het denken van de mensen te veranderen en zal het makkelijker maken om sociale rechtvaardigheid te realiseren. Niemand moet het belang van religie onderschatten: ten eerste, ze heeft de kracht om het gedrag van de meerderheid te bevestigen of te veranderen—ten nadele of ten voordele van de minderheden in de samenleving. Ten tweede, ze biedt een blauwdruk hoe de samenleving geordend moet worden—Ambedkars *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. Dit is een even centraal als lastig punt in zijn religietheorie, omdat hij twee verschillende zaken in balans moet houden: de inspiratie van religie en de uitwerking van de idealen in wetten. In een land met een veelheid van religieuze tradities, zoals India, ontstaat een onoplosbaar probleem, dat van het communalisme. De uiteenlopende religies

vormen verschillende collectieven van gelovigen die elk hun eigen ideeën over de juiste manier van leven hebben. Gegeven de diversiteit van religieuze gemeenschappen staat Ambedkar dus voor een volgend probleem: als de religie de ordening van de staat ten goede verandert, heeft de rechtvaardige staat eenheid van religie nodig. Hieruit valt af te leiden dat als de samenleving volgens Ambedkars idealen kon worden hervormd, deze staat geen alternatieve religies met andere maatschappelijke idealen zou kunnen tolereren.

De sociale orde van elke religie moest dus worden geëvalueerd aan de hand van (feitelijk) de criteria van redelijkheid en mensenrechten. Na zijn bestudering van de diverse religies concludeerde Ambedkar dat het buitengewoon moeilijk zou zijn om ze te hervormen. De uitweg die hij uiteindelijk heeft gekozen was om zelf een religieuze beweging te formeren die geheel op zijn beginselen was gebaseerd. In zijn evaluatie van de feitelijke religies legde Ambedkar de fundamentele wortels van de ontwikkeling van religies gedurende enkele millennia bloot. Daartoe bracht hij zijn drie beginselen – bewaren van het leven en van de samenleving en bescherming van de persoon – terug tot *nut* en *rechtvaardigheid*, die zijns inziens immers de basis van het bestuur van de samenleving moeten vormen.

Ik vat samen. Een religie die *nut* en *rechtvaardigheid* legitimeert in plaats van het bovennatuurlijke normatief te verklaren, is *redelijk*. Die religie voedt het bijgeloof niet. Een religie die legitimeert wat *nuttig*, *rechtvaardig* en *redelijk* is, verschaft een goede blauwdruk voor de sociale orde en de beheersing van het gedrag van de mensen. Zo wordt in plaats van de wet de moraal de norm. Een religie die deze test zou doorstaan, zou de *established* religie van het land moeten worden. Op dit punt kan Ambedkar in zijn visie op de samenleving de religieuze diversiteit geen goede plaats geven in zijn visie. Als staatsman met de gelijkberechtiging van de dalit als voornaamste agendapunt, heeft hij zich de onmogelijkheid om alle religies rondom de democratische beginselen van gelijkheid en vrijheid te verenigen, gerealiseerd.

Een samenleving die ernaar zou streven alle mensen vrij en gelijk te maken is pas een rechtvaardige samenleving. Het nut van de religie voor de samenleving ligt erin dat de religie het *recht* en de *gerechtigheid* behoedt en legitimeert. Het eerste impliceert gelijke behandeling voor de wet, het tweede solidariteit, wederzijdse verantwoordelijkheid en gezamenlijke zorg voor mensen. Vanuit zijn visie op *recht* en *gerechtigheid* had Ambedkar ontdekt dat de slagzin van de Franse Revolutie – vrijheid, gelijkheid en broederschap – uiteindelijk religieuze wortels heeft.

De Staat moet wetten voor de samenleving vaststellen, ze uitvoeren en overtreders straffen. Mensen moeten niet alleen in vrede leven; ook hun persoonlijke belangen moeten gewaarborgd zijn. De overheid moet een midden vinden tussen een gesloten samenleving en individuen die hun vrijheid gebruiken om alleen voor zichzelf te leven. Hier ligt de reden waarom Ambedkar juist aan religie zo'n

belangrijke rol toekent: religie houdt de belangen van de persoon en van het geheel bij elkaar. Maar omdat religies ook onrechtvaardige wetten en visies op het leven kunnen legitimeren, moeten religies worden getoetst.

Ambedkar was dus van mening dat religie het gezag heeft om wetten te sanctioneren, zoals de *dharma*, de *dhamma* en het evangelie feitelijk hebben gedaan. Eenmaal gesanctioneerd, wordt deze ideologieën zelf ook heilig verklaard. Een religie die deze status heeft verworven, gaat na verloop van tijd haar waarheid als onbetwistbaar verkondigen. Daardoor is het mogelijk dat een religie sociale ongelijkheid legitimeert; dit geldt onder andere van het kastenstelsel. Daarom moet elke religie worden onderworpen aan een *toetsing op het aambeeld van rechtvaardigheid*. We hebben al gezegd dat deze methode van beoordeling van religies de complexiteit van religie geen recht doet. Maar laat ik nu Ambedkars evaluatie van de verschillende religies in India weergeven.

**8. De oorspronkele religies :** Omdat ze sterk ritualistisch georganiseerd waren, boden ze een vaste structuur om de zichtbare en onzichtbare machten die het leven bedreigen, het hoofd te bieden. Dit waren primitieve wetreligies. In hun praktijken zag Ambedkar al aanzetten tot onaanraakbaarheid. Een persoon die als besmet werd beschouwd, bleef dat totdat de vereiste rituelen om hem/haar weer in de samenleving op te nemen, waren uitgevoerd. Hoewel het nuttig was om de aard van de primitieve samenleving en oorspronkelijke religies te bestuderen, concludeerde Ambedkar dat deze religies niet geschikt zijn om mensen op de moderniteit voor te bereiden.

**9. De hindoes:** Als grote hinderpaal van de hindoes zag Ambedkar het kastenstelsel met zijn sociale stratificatie. Deze, zo stelde hij vast, is vastgelegd in de *dharma*; daardoor is deze religie een wetreligie geworden. Volgens de regels van de *dharma* wordt de samenleving in vier kasten geordend: onder de hoogste kaste, de brahmanen (priesters) zijn de andere kasten, in afnemende graad van zuiverheid: de *kshatiya* (strijders), de *vaishya* (zakenmensen) en de *shudra* (bedienden); de overige bevolking valt als onrein (en dus on-aanraakbaar) buiten het kastenstelsel. Het kastenstelsel wordt door de *dharma* gelegitimeerd. Talloze mensen hebben de gevolgen van deze ongelijkheid—isolatie, discriminatie en onderdrukking—ondergaan. De mensen die het meest onder deze gebrokenheid hebben geleden zijn de dalit.

**10. De moslims:** Ondanks hun religieuze ideaal van gelijkheid behandelden moslims hun medegelovigen niet als gelijken. Ambedkar wijst bijvoorbeeld op de indeling van de samenleving in Bengalen. Daar kenden de moslims een indeling van hoger naar lager geplaatsten: van *ashraf* via *ajlaf* naar *arzal*. Deze indeling komt met het kastenstelsel overeen, met deze nuancering dat men op beperkte schaal wel huwelijken tussen leden van de diverse groepen toestond. De islamitische traditie

met haar sterke nadruk op de *sharia* (de religieuze regelgeving) met daarnaast een vorm van het kastenstelsel, was een wetreligie en geen religie van (morele) principes. Als gevolg daarvan hebben mensen ernstig geleden onder onvrijheid, ongelijkheid en gebrek aan sociale omgang met elkaar.

**11. De christenen:** Vrij van de traditie van religieus wetticisme is het christendom een religie van principes. Maar ondanks de hoge idealen van gelijkheid, vrijheid en broederschap spelen kastenverschillen toch ook in de christelijke gemeenschappen een rol. Daarbij komt dat het christendom in India politiek zwak en getalsmatig onbeduidend was (en is).

**12. De sikhs:** Ook voor sikhisme geldt dat het als religie van principes toch door het kastenstelsel is besmet. Een voorbeeld van de ongelijkheid onder de Sikhs waren de Ramdasi gemeenschappen—gelovige Sikhs, die als ‘Scheduled Caste’ zijn aangemerkt en zo onder de voorkeurswetgeving vielen.

**13. De joden:** De joden vormen een oude en belangwekkende gemeenschap in India. Hoewel het jodendom een wetreligie is, heeft het zich aan de moderne samenleving aangepast. In Indiase context was de gemeenschap op een kaste-achtige manier in *gora* (blanke) en *kala* (zwarte) joden verdeeld. Voor een aantal aspecten van zijn theorie van religie was Ambedkar geïnteresseerd in de joodse geschriften, maar hij heeft nooit overwogen om zich tot het jodendom te bekeren.

In feite vond Ambedkar na zijn beoordeling van deze religies in India dat geen ervan geschikt was als huis voor de dalit.

**14. De boeddhisten:** Hij bekeerde zich tot boeddhisme—de andere religies hebben zijn toetsing niet doorstaan. Zoals bekend zijn er veel stromingen binnen het boeddhisme, maar geen enkele daarvan vond Ambedkar relevant voor de dalit. Instinctief ertoe aangetrokken, is hij, toen hij door zijn langdurig slechte gezondheid aan het einde van zijn leven kwam, tot het besluit gekomen om zich te bekeren tot een beweging die hij zelf vanuit zijn eigen idealen vorm kon geven. Hij herschreef boeddhistische geschriften volgens de lijnen van de evangeliën, zowel in de weergave van het leven van de Boeddha als wat betreft de ethiek. Verhalen die hij als irrationeel ervoer, heeft hij geschrapt, zoals het verhaal van Gautama’s ontmoetingen met een oude, een zieke en een dode man. In feite kwam hij tot een afgeknotte vorm van boeddhisme, die hij *Navyana*, neo-boeddhisme, noemde. De *dhamma* van de rechtvaardigheid werd gelegitimeerd als norm voor een rechtvaardige samenleving. Op deze manier vond hij tenslotte zijn religie van beginselen.

Zoals we hebben gezien waren de centrale formuleringen aan de hand waarvan Ambedkar religie als een sociale constructie kon voorstellen, zijn definitie van religie als een *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* en zijn twee normen, *nut* en *rechtvaardigheid*. Dat was zijn maatstaf ter beoordeling van de godsdiensten. We kunnen dit

Ambedkars reductionistische methode noemen. Als gevolg van deze reductionistische methode liep zijn beschouwing van de religies op enkele innerlijke tegenspraken uit en stond zijn uiteindelijke beslissing tot bekering op gespannen voet met hetgeen waarvoor hij zich had ingezet. Zijn consequente benadering van religie mag dan helder lijken, maar ze ontnam hem het zicht op de breedte en de complexe aard van religie, die zich niet in de begrippen nut, rechtvaardigheid en rationaliteit laat vangen. Hij elimineerde wat buiten de reikwijdte van zijn normering viel, vooral de transcendentie. Deze reductionistische benadering doet de feitelijke werkelijkheid van religie geen recht. Maar hij was zo overtuigd van de sociale betekenis van religie dat hij de verschillen tussen de diverse religieuze stromingen verwaarloosde en aan de feitelijke religieuze pluraliteit in de samenleving voorbijging. Als zijn reductionistische beoordeling van religies erin geslaagd zou zijn om een einde te maken aan de rituelen, de geloofsvoorstellingen en morele systemen van de diverse religieuze stromingen, dan was ook hun samenbindende functie voor de diverse religieuze gemeenschappen verloren gegaan. Daarmee was heel de structuur van de Indiase samenleving kapot gemaakt. Maar zonder wat de mensen samenbond, had ook zijn religie, het *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*, niet meer kunnen werken, want dan zou de bevolking in talloze kleine, onverbonden eenheden uiteen zijn gevallen.

Hoe dit ook zij, op 14 oktober 1956 begon Ambedkar in Nagpur de nieuwe boeddhistische stroming waarvan hij het eerste lid werd; 300,000 mensen volgden hem ter plekke en bekeerden zich tot het neo-boeddhisme. Zo slaagde hij erin om volgens zijn reductionistische concept een nieuwe religieuze gemeenschap te formeren. Deze gemeenschap zou niet uiteen mogen vallen in diverse stromingen met verschillende ideeën en praktijken. In theorie mag dit wellicht een organisatie met een hoge graad van eenheid zijn, maar in zo'n homogene gemeenschap zouden mensen met afwijkende opvattingen en afwijkend gedrag ongetwijfeld gemarginaliseerd worden.

Door een vorm van neo-boeddhisme te creëren vond Ambedkar een weg om aan de Indiase nationale identiteit trouw te blijven, terwijl hij toch afscheid nam van de religie die de cultuur van het land bepaalt. Hij deed wat hij publiekelijk had aangekondigd: hij nam afscheid van het hindoeïsme, maar hij bleef de nationale *roots* trouw door zich niet tot een *foreign* religie te bekeren. Met de beslissing om een neo-boeddhistische beweging te vormen, liet Ambedkar zijn ideaal van een egalitaire 'religie voor iedereen' vallen. Zijn bekering staat haaks op zijn ideaal om een rechtvaardige samenleving te vestigen die door een egalitaire religie zou worden ondersteund. Deze tegenspraak tussen ideaal en feitelijke gedrag laat zich alleen vanuit zijn reductionistische opvatting van religie verklaren.



Laten we proberen te begrijpen hoe het mogelijk was dat hij in deze valkuil terecht kon komen. De reden is dat voor de opbouw van een plurale samenleving de vraagstelling – wat is de beste religie? – niet deugt. Ik denk dat heel de exercitie om de waarde van een religie boven alle andere te bewijzen geen mens ervan zou overtuigen zich tot die ‘beste’ religie te bekeren. De werkelijke vraag is hoe we in een religieus diverse samenleving tot een algemeen aanvaarde morele standaard kunnen komen. Dit is een centrale vraag voor de staat want die is verantwoordelijk voor het samenleven van mensen met uiteenlopende overtuigingen in één land. Mensen van allerlei religies en ideologieën moeten met een gemeenschappelijke morele standaard instemmen. De staat vooronderstelt sociale consensus en sociale cohesie, maar kan die zelf niet bewerkstelligen en garanderen. Maar als er een morele consensus is bereikt, kunnen de diverse religieuze groeperingen hun leden van deze morele standaard overtuigen, want zij kunnen op de loyaliteit van hun gemeenschap rekenen. Ambedkar zocht deze samenwerking niet; in plaats daarvan ging hij ertoe over om voor zijn eigen gemeenschap een religie te stichten die gelijkheid voorop stelde

Naar mijn mening kan een gedeelde morele consensus alleen in interreligieuze dialoog worden bereikt. Dialoog is een ontmoeting van mensen uit alle religies en ideologieën waarin ieders stem – afwijkend of niet – wordt gehoord. Dit proces vergt heel wat: de nederigheid om te willen leren van anderen en hun overtuiging met respect tegemoet te treden; gevoeligheid voor de gevoelens van anderen; vertrouwen in de eigen geloofstraditie; en het vermogen om verschillen op een beleefde manier onder woorden te brengen. Niettemin is het mogelijk om tot een gedeelde morele standaard te komen en een waardesysteem te ontwikkelen dat voor alle groeperingen acceptabel is. Dat waardestelsel kan als burgerlijke moraal dienen, dat is: als het hart en geweten van de samenleving.

In de Indiase samenleving zien we dat de verschillende gemeenschappen en kasten naast elkaar bestaan zonder zich voor elkaar te interesseren. Zelfs als betere wetgeving het leven voor de dalit eenvoudiger zouden maken, zou dit mensen uit de vier kasten er niet toe brengen om met dalit om te gaan. Voor sociaal gedrag over de grens tussen kasten en kastelozen heen, is nodig dat de mensen die onrecht hebben moeten verduren zich verzoenen met de mensen die hen dit onrecht hebben aangedaan. Initiatieven voor zulke processen van verzoening kunnen niet bestaan in vage compromissen, want wederzijdse acceptatie houdt in dat degenen die onrecht is aangedaan voortaan zichzelf kunnen zijn (*selfhood*). *Selfhood* is een positieve emotionele staat van een mens. Ze blijkt uit zelf-vertrouwen en -achting, die zichtbaar is in iemands geestelijk en fysiek welzijn. Dan bloeien mensen op.

Rechtvaardigheid mondt niet vanzelf in sociale integratie uit. In de Indiase samenleving, met haar verschillende geïnstitutionaliseerde gemeenschappen, kan

verzoening alleen worden bereikt door mensen met verschillende achtergronden bijeen te brengen. In zulke ontmoetingen moet de nadruk op het gedeelde mens-zijn vallen, ongeacht religieuze en culturele verschillen. Een gemeenschappelijke morele standaard voor de samenleving als geheel kan helpen om rechtvaardige wetgeving met een breed proces van verzoening te verbinden. Dan komt de weg vrij om innerlijke wonden te helen en de gebroken *selfhood* van mensen te herstellen.

Ondanks de tekortkomingen van Ambedkars houding tegenover de verschillende religies, blijft zijn eis dat geloof wordt beoordeeld *op het aambeeld van rechtvaardigheid* overeind staan. Hoeveel miljoenen mensen er ook onder de excessen van het kastenstelsel hebben geleden, maar weinig mensen hebben erop gereageerd zoals Ambedkar. Zelden heeft iemand het doordacht op het niveau dat hij, in zijn tijd, heeft bereikt. We leren van hem dat ons geloof in wat onze religies ons leren, moet helpen om een rechtvaardige maatschappij te vestigen waarin mensen gelijkwaardig en vrij zijn. Als onze religie ons dit niet leert, dan moeten we inderdaad een andere zoeken. Zijn doel was om elk onderdeel van religie te gebruiken om gerechtigheid en kwaliteit van leven te bevorderen: voor allen. Zijn visie is belangrijk in een periode waarin de ervaring van de Indiase identiteit niet op gerechtigheid maar op de 'gezamenlijke' cultuur wordt gebaseerd. Vanuit de verbondenheid van cultuur en religie heeft de religie de cultuur inderdaad gelegitimeerd, waardoor de heersende culturele en sociale normen onnadenkend worden geaccepteerd. In deze tijd klinkt Ambedkars boodschap helder en duidelijk: gerechtigheid is de belangrijkste bouwsteen van de samenleving en niet de gegroeide cultuur.

Ironisch genoeg heeft Ambedkar, degene die naast Mahatma Gandhi de moderne democratische staat India heeft gevestigd, na zijn overlijden in Mumbai geen staatsbegrafenis mogen ontvangen. Hoewel op zijn uitdrukkelijk verzoek de *Ashokchakra* (het blauwe wiel in het hart van de nationale vlag van India) aan zijn laatste rituelen was toegevoegd, was zijn lichaam er niet in gehuld. Bij zijn begrafenis werd hij niet geëerd met eenentwintig saluutschoten en de Last Post. Maar sinds 1956 komen er wel elk jaar miljoenen mensen naar *Chaityabhoomi* in Mumbai om hem te eren. Dit laat zien dat de dalit zich hem herinneren en zich nog lange tijd door zijn daden en gedachtegoed zullen laten inspireren.

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